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THE SHADOW FALLS

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MAIGRET AND M. LABBÉ
IN TWO LATITUDES
AFFAIRS OF DESTINY
THE MAN WHO WATCHED
THE TRAINS GO BY
HAVOC BY ACCIDENT
ESCAPE IN VAIN
ON THE DANGER LINE

Georges Simenon

THE SHADOW FALLS

Translated from the French by

STUART GILBERT

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Translated from the French:
Le Testament Donadieu

PART I: LA ROCHELLE

I

AN attendant crossed the lobby and, after opening the big glazed entrance-doors of the Alhambra picture-house, held her hand out cautiously, to see if the rain had stopped. Then, wrapping her black shawl more closely round her chest, she moved back into the lobby. As if this were a signal, the woman who owned the sweet-stall on the pavement beside the entrance crossed over from the doorway in which she had been sheltering, and took her stand behind her display of nougat, caramels, and roasted peanuts. And at the same moment the policeman at the corner of the Rue du Palais began walking up the street towards the cinema.

All this was a daily routine, and there was something comforting about it, as there always is in a familiar sequence of events. One knew where one was—at La Rochelle—and, knowing this, could tell at once it was a Wednesday, for a yellow band across the poster standing on the pavement announced: "*Entirely New Programme.*" Whereas, in most French provincial picture-houses, the change of programme always takes place over the week-end.

It had rained all the evening and a big umbrella sheltered the sweet-vendor's stall. Most of the people coming out made the same gesture as the black-shawled attendant, then glanced up at the sky. And perhaps a hundred of them, at their third or fourth step on the pavement, made the same observation, a husband to his wife, a wife to her husband:

"Good! It's cleared up at last."

But the air was still damp and raw. Really, there had been no summer to speak of. The Casino had closed a fortnight earlier than usual, and now, at the end of September, one might have been in mid-winter. There was a frosty sheen in the sky, and ragged clouds were scudding low under a few pale stars.

Ten or twelve cars were waiting outside. There was a purr of starters. Headlights blazed out, and all the cars set off in the same

direction, none of the drivers blowing his horn, because of the policeman ; then put on speed, once clear of the crowd.

It was a Wednesday night like any Wednesday night in autumn. Two other details reminded one that this was La Rochelle and no other town. At the corner of the street, for one thing, everybody looked up, as a matter of course, at the Clock Tower to see the time ; five minutes before midnight. The performances at other cinemas were usually over by eleven ; that at the Alhambra ended later because there was a music-hall turn included in the programme.

The second detail was a sound which, once used to it, one seldom noticed : a low persistent throbbing somewhere in the background, interspersed with creaks of pulley-blocks and tackle. Everyone could tell, without going to see, that the tide was making in the harbour ; an equinoctial tide that would soon rise level with the quays, so that from a distance the fishing-boats seemed grounded, high and dry, on the roadway.

Meanwhile, as in provincial cinemas all the world over, the proprietor was visiting the box-office to collect the day's takings. An elderly woman, her hat already on, handed him a long buff envelope, on which were pencilled columns of figures. They exchanged a few words, unheard outside the small glass cage. The barmar, always one of the last to leave, saluted them as he went by.

So now the proprietor had only to lock the entrance-doors before retiring to the little snuggery he slept in, at the top of the building alongside the projection-room. The auditorium was empty, its cavernous gloom emphasized by the single ceiling-lamp that stayed on day and night.

“Good night, Madame Michat.”

“Good night, Monsieur Dargens.”

And old Mme Michat, who was of a nervous temperament, hurried as fast as her legs could carry her along the deserted streets, shooting a timid glance behind at every corner, as she always did on her way home at midnight. When turning to the right at the end of the Rue du Palais, she almost collided with a young man who was standing there, smoking a cigarette.

“So sorry. . . . Oh, it's you, Monsieur Philippe. I didn't recognize you.”

"Many people tonight?" the young man asked.

"Six hundred and fifty francs in the house."

The young man was Philippe Dargens, son of the Alhambra's owner. Tossing his cigarette into the gutter, he lit another, gave a fretful look at the clock, then started up a narrow by-street, which led by a roundabout way to the Town Park.

In all directions people were entering their houses; footsteps ceased abruptly, then came the slam of a closing door, and one could even hear the remarks exchanged by couples unaware that sounds carry far in an empty town at night.

A sea-breeze was blowing and the air was saturated with moisture that clung to the skin, leaving a tang of brine on the lips. Philippe turned up the collar of his overcoat and, drawing at his cigarette, read the time on his wrist-watch.

Headlights flashed in the distance, where a belated car was leaving the Park, and now the young man swerved to his right, and started walking alongside the high brick wall which bounded the gardens of the houses fronting the Rue Réaumur. These were, for the most part, private residences of considerable size, standing in their own grounds and owned by well-to-do citizens of La Rochelle.

After he had walked some fifty yards, a small door opened in the wall, a dim figure showed up in the doorway. Dropping his cigarette on the turf and heeling it in, Philippe stepped into the darkness of a garden.

A voice whispered: "Why didn't you come yesterday?"

His only response was a shrug of his shoulders, unseen by the woman beside him; then, as if to make her understand it wasn't his fault, he patted her arm.

It was pitch dark under the plane-trees and chestnuts, and the paths were already carpeted with dead leaves. At the far end of the garden the house loomed up, a square black patch in the surrounding gloom; only the wet slates of the roof glimmered faintly in the starlight.

"Do stay a bit," she begged.

"Ssh! Don't talk now. I'll be back presently."

"Listen, Philippe!"

"Not so loud!"

"Promise me, then. . . ."

This was the nastiest part of the whole business. Only some thirty yards separated him from that other low doorway in a wall, which led into the grounds of the next house. And there was no more than a minute of it to get over; hardly that. But a minute during which he felt Charlotte's small body strained to his, her thin arms clasping him like tentacles that never would let go; an endless minute, tense with forebodings. . . .

"I promise you, dear, I'll stay on my way back."

"That's what you said on Saturday, but you slipped off without . . ."

He gripped her shoulders; he could feel the small, sharp bones under the coarse fabric of her coat—and with an effort dabbed a vague kiss on her forehead.

"Don't be anxious. This time I swear I'll come."

She made a little snuffling noise. And he knew that for the next hour or so, all the time he was away, she would stay there, sobbing in the darkness, waiting for his return.

But it couldn't be helped. Once he was by himself in the next garden, this unwelcome prelude passed clean out of his mind, and he walked with brisker, freer steps. A necessary evil—that was the way to look at it. And, since he had no choice, the best thing was not to think of the return journey, Charlotte's crude embraces, her fond, futile questions.

Brushing past iron chairs and a big round garden table, he walked rapidly along the edge of the lawn, skirting the gravel path on which his footsteps might be heard. When he was four yards from a french window, he saw a faint movement behind it.

The house was in darkness. Slowly the window swung open, as if of its own accord—just as, a few minutes before, the door in the wall had opened—and a white form could be dimly seen in the lightless room. Without giving any sign of recognition, Philippe thrust aside the branch of a rambler rose that hung across the window; he found it as readily as the lamp-switch in his bedroom. Then, placing a foot on the stone plinth and a knee on the window-ledge, he swung himself in.

White curtains fluttered in the night-breeze. A bed that had been lain in was growing cold. And Philippe wondered anxiously why the lips to which he pressed his mouth seemed less responsive than usual.

Another thing puzzled him ; Martine had kept her underclothes on under her nightdress, and she stiffened up instead of yielding to his embrace.

“What’s wrong ?” he asked, so softly that the words would have been unintelligible to anyone unfamiliar with his voice.

The room was in darkness, but he could just make out a tense white face, fever-bright eyes intent on him, and he knew, he could have sworn, that something had changed.

And when he made a tentative move in the direction of the bed, Martine checked him with a gesture so peremptory that he now felt certain she had planned it in advance. Deliberately she forced him back towards the window, where she could see something of the expression on his face.

“Look at me !” she commanded, holding his wrists to prevent his putting his arms round her.

“What’s come over you, Martine ?” he asked, and, precisely because she had told him to do so, he could not meet her eyes, and hung his head guiltily.

“Let me see your face, Philippe.”

There was something dramatic, almost tragic, in Martine’s attitude. He was conscious of a tension in the air of this silent, sleep-bound house, where the least creak of a floor-board, a word spoken over-loud, might bring catastrophe.

Martine’s brother, a boy of fifteen—a sullen, suspicious youngster—slept in the opposite room. And her mother in the next room but one.

The whole house, from the top floor to the ground floor, was peopled by Donadieus, old and young ; sons, brothers, a daughter-in-law. Philippe was standing at the window with the youngest girl of the family, Martine, who was only in her eighteenth year.

Suddenly, and not for the first time, he felt a qualm of fear—why, he hardly knew ; perhaps because of those keen young eyes intent on him, eyes in which no affection shone, no gentleness.

“Look at me!”

Again he was conscious of that slight recoil, so unlike her usual readiness to sink into his arms.

“I want the truth, Philippe. . . .” Tonight she was raising her voice—that, again, was unusual—courting disaster. But there seemed no way of checking her.

“Where is father? What’s happened to my father?”

“To your father?” he repeated wonderingly.

He had no notion what she meant. What a maddening situation! Under ordinary circumstances, had he dared to speak above a whisper, it should have been easy enough to calm her down. Martine, he knew, was highly strung, and inclined to let her fancies run away with her. Most likely she had misunderstood some remark she’d overheard, and built up some fantastic theory about her father, in which he, Philippe, heaven alone knew why, was involved.

“Answer me.”

“I haven’t a notion what you’re talking about.”

But how make a remark like that sound convincing when one has to mumble it between one’s teeth? And how hope to carry conviction when one’s face is all but invisible, lit only by vagrant gleams from a few faint stars?

“I insist on knowing, Philippe. No, don’t look away. You . . . you’ve done something, haven’t you?”

“I assure you, darling, I don’t understand a word you’re saying.”

“That’s a lie! Oh, I know you’re quite capable of lying. But . . . Philippe!”

It was like a cry of despair. He still could see the white patch of the bed glimmering in the darkness of the room, and near him, too near, those pale, insistent eyes.

“I’ve only just come back from Bordeaux,” he said. “I went there last Saturday, as I told you. How can I know what’s happened—what you mean?”

But she didn’t seem to hear. And he realized that she, too, was growing exasperated, on the brink, it seemed, of an outburst of anger, or of tears.

“Haven’t you seen your father yet, Philippe?”

"I saw him just now, for five minutes, at the cinema."

"Didn't he tell you anything?"

"No, he didn't!" Unthinkingly he had raised his voice.

She stared morosely at the floor, still unconvinced.

"Well, then, I simply don't understand," she murmured. "Perhaps you really don't know what's happened. Still, I had a feeling it must be you who'd . . ."

Suddenly her self-control broke down, and she started wringing her hands.

"Martine, for heaven's sake . . .!"

"No, don't touch me. I don't want . . ."

"But what ever is it? Do tell me what's the trouble."

Steadying herself with an effort, she peered again through the shadows at the half-seen face in front of her; then made a despondent gesture.

"I don't know. I thought . . . You might quite well have done it. Yes, I should say you wouldn't stick at anything!"

"Martine!"

What made it so nerve-racking was that all the time one had to bear in mind the presence of the other people in the silent house.

At last the girl gave way; in a slow, toneless voice she said:

"Something's happened to my father. He hasn't been seen since last Saturday."

She emphasized that "last Saturday"—which had already cropped up in their conversation—as if it were a momentous date. And Philippe, too, exclaimed: "Last Saturday!"

For that was the day he had last come to see Martine; on the following morning he had left for Bordeaux. And she—had she not half believed he wouldn't come tonight; would never come again?

In almost the same tone as Martine he repeated: "Last Saturday!"

It was Charlotte who, almost by chance, had been the first to scent something unusual in the wind. Not wholly by chance, for she had an uncanny gift of detecting signs, however trivial, of anything amiss.

At a quarter to ten on Sunday morning Mme Brun was dressing for Mass in her huge house, once a seignorial mansion, whose grounds adjoined the Donadieu's. Charlotte was with her, and about the two women there brooded, as always, an old-world peace, almost the defunctive peace of a museum. Checkered by the diamond panes, the morning sunlight played on innumerable small objects on shelves and tables—bric-à-brac in porcelain and silver, mother-o'-pearl and coral; on walls whence family portraits looked down, sedate or simpering, from their dark backgrounds; on old prints foxed with reddish glints.

Charlotte, who always attended early service, had already been to church, and had done the morning's marketing on her way home. Now, after changing into her everyday clothes, she was helping Mme Brun into her black silk dress. When that was done, she hooked the broad black band of watered silk that the old lady always wore round her neck, giving it a quaintly elongated air, like the necks of the swans in the Town Park.

Suddenly, though she had half a dozen pins between her teeth, ready for an emergency, she exclaimed :

“Well I never! The Donadieu's are starting off for church, and the Shipowner's not with them.”

Mme Brun looked quite startled. That Oscar Donadieu, locally known as “The Shipowner,” should fail to head the family procession on its way to Mass was something almost unbelievable.

“Are you quite sure?”

“Positive, Madame. . . . There they are.” She pointed towards the road.

Though Charlotte was more of a companion to the old lady than a maid, she nearly always, out of inverted snobbery perhaps, addressed her with formality, rarely omitting the “Madame.”

It was a fine morning, but the light was bleak and there was a frosty edge on the air.

The big double door with its ponderous brass knocker had closed again, and the Donadieu family was now advancing up the tranquil Rue Réaumur in a sort of ritual progress—but a progress lacking its chief participant.

Prayer-book in hand, Martine Donadieu headed the procession.

She was in a white dress, the dress she had worn almost every Sunday throughout the summer. Beside her walked her fifteen-year-old brother, Oscar, who had just started wearing long trousers.

Often, when the two women were sewing or doing embroidery-work, Mme Brun would talk of Martine, whose young grace appealed to her.

"I'm sure she's far the cleverest of the rising generation," she would say. "She has her father's eyes."

And she never noticed the wry smile that came to Charlotte's plain, prematurely aged face when she talked in this strain.

"The boy," she would add, "looks rather a poor specimen. I shouldn't wonder if he's a bit feeble-minded."

As usual, the two grandchildren, Jean and Maurice, both in sailor suits, walked behind Martine and her brother. Then came the grown-ups: Michel Donadieu and his wife, Eva, whose dresses always struck a daring note, by local standards. Next behind them were Jean Olsen, the son-in-law, and his wife, Marthe, *née* Donadieu.

The Queen-Mother, as Charlotte called her, brought up the rear. Mme Donadieu was a big stately-looking woman, but infirm, and leant heavily on her stick at every step.

"That's so," said Mme Brun, after a glance at the family procession. "The Shipowner's not with them. I wonder now . . ."

Still, so far, there was nothing much in it; his absence might have some quite simple, innocuous explanation.

No sooner was Mass over that Sunday than the big blue car was brought out of the garage. With its brass head-lamps, seating-room for ten, and cut-glass flower-vases, it wore its age, ten years, with dignity. Only the eldest son, Michel Donadieu, got into it, and he drove off with the chauffeur, while Mme Brun and Charlotte, watching at their window, commented excitedly on this new development.

"I'm certain something's happening!"

For the unusual or unforeseen played no part in the life of the Donadieus. Their days went to a schedule, their movements were so nicely regulated that any citizen of La Rochelle could have set his watch by them as surely as by the Town Clock.

Though there were other shipping magnates in the town, Oscar Donadieu was *the Shipowner* and, as if by virtue of his status as chief of the leading clan—for the Donadieus were more a clan than a mere family—the definite article sounded like an honorific prefix. Fifteen years before, there had been a striking proof of his prestige. When he renounced protestantism for the Catholic Faith, five other protestant families (and five other shipowners) followed his lead.

A tall, broad-shouldered man, he brought to mind one of those statuary columns one sees in ancient temples, shoring up the roof. Unbowed for all his seventy-four years, he was as firm in his opinions as upright in his dealings, and such indeed was his esteem that he was regularly called on to arbitrate in cases where large sums of money were involved.

The Donadieu stronghold was not in the same street as the family mansion, but on one of the wharves beside the harbour, the Quai Vallin. A lugubrious light prevailed in the thirty offices housed in its four stories—the staff could hardly see to do their work even on a summer day—and its outer aspect was equally austere.

Facing it were coal dumps, and there were usually several colliers, flying the Donadieu House Flag, unloading Donadieu coal. Near by was a railway siding with trucks and refrigerator-vans, and trawlers made fast alongside; Donadieu vans, trucks, and trawlers.

At exactly ten to eight each morning three men set forth from the house in the Rue Réaumur: the Shipowner; his son Michel, who, though thirty-seven years old, hung behind him like a timid schoolboy; and Olsen, his son-in-law, five years younger than Michel, who had developed into a true Donadieu, punctual and precise of speech.

On arriving at the office building, each of the trio took charge of a floor, a department, and settled down in his sanctum behind a massive, baize-lined door. Similarly, each had a floor to himself in the dwelling-house. The Head of the House occupied the ground floor with his wife and the two children, Martine and Oscar; the elder son, Michel, his wife and children, had the first

floor to themselves; while that above was occupied by Olsen and his wife, *née* Donadieu, and their seven-year-old son.

Mme Brun and Charlotte knew the routine of the Donadieu household by heart, minute by minute. And their curiosity rose to fever-pitch when the Shipowner failed to return, and on the Monday morning his son and son-in-law, instead of going to office at the usual hour, lingered for some time in earnest confabulation near the gate.

“Perhaps he’s gone for a trip somewhere,” Mme Brun suggested.

“No, Madame, it can hardly be that.” There was an undertone of ghoulish excitement in Charlotte’s voice. “They wouldn’t be upset like they are if that was all.”

“What’s your idea, then?”

“You never can tell . . .”

That was one of her favourite expressions. A quaint little creature, Charlotte, with a stunted body and a small, witch-like face, peaked and wizened. She had been “help” at a convent till she reached the age of thirty; then something had befallen her, a tragic incident of which she never breathed a word to anyone. She had undergone an operation, and when Mme Brun took her under her roof, Charlotte was like a limp rag, sexless, without any interest in life, it seemed, except to please her employer. And she would spend long hours daily bent over her embroidery, in the half-empty house over which a gardener and his wife, who occupied a cottage in the grounds, kept watch and ward.

At noon on Tuesday Charlotte cried:

“Come and look!”

So thrilled was she that she forgot her usual “Madame.” And not without reason. Accompanying Michel, who had just come back from the town, was none other than M. Jeannet, the Public Prosecutor, and something in his demeanour indicated that this was no ordinary visit. One guessed there was to be a marshalling of the clan, a council of war, in the big drawing-room on the ground floor.

“I shouldn’t be surprised if something tragic has happened.”

Sometimes it really seemed that Charlotte had second sight. Still, though there was as yet no certainty of any tragic explanation,

what had happened was startling enough. Oscar Donadieu, shipping magnate and pillar of society, had inexplicably vanished from the face of the earth.

On the Saturday evening he had gone as usual to his Club, on the Place d'Armes. Only on Saturdays—because there was no office-work the next day—did he permit himself to remain there as late as midnight and play some rubbers of bridge at very low points.

But he had not come home at all on that last Saturday night. The other members of the household did not dare to stay away from church, but no sooner was the service over than Michel hurried in the car to the Donadieus' country house at Esnandes, after some vain attempts to call it up on the 'phone, on the remote chance that his father had gone there.

“Nothing!” he announced on his return.

Sunday was the one day in the week when the three households gathered in the ground-floor dining-room—under orders. This Sunday there was an atmosphere of tension and dismay. They had discussed the situation till they were tired of their own voices. Eva, the daughter-in-law, was for notifying the police; this merely showed how little she knew the Shipowner, otherwise she would never have dreamed of making such a suggestion.

Oscar Donadieu was the lord and master, and he alone could have indicated the correct procedure. But—he wasn't there! All they agreed on was that no steps should be taken that might give rise to gossip.

On the Monday morning Charlotte, from one of her numerous observation-posts in the neighbouring house, had noticed something that never happened on week-days: people moving to and fro from floor to floor.

And now the Public Prosecutor, the leading representative of law and order at La Rochelle, had called.

“I'll make discreet enquiries. Needless to say, there will be no publicity; not a word in the papers.”

And in the small hours of the Wednesday night Martine Donadieu, giving no thought to love, or to the bed in which the sheets were now stone-cold, stood shivering in her nightdress near the open window, cross-questioning Philippe.

"Are you quite sure your father didn't tell you anything?"

"Absolutely sure."

"He was the last person seen with my father. They left the Club together."

So clearly did that remark convey the suspicions of the family that Philippe began to lose his self-assurance; there was a slight tremor in his voice when he asked:

"Have enquiries been made?"

"Yes, but unofficially—so far. . . . They were seen leaving the Club. After that . . ."

Forgetting the other people in the house, they were beginning to raise their voices.

"But, Martine, surely you know that my father would never—"

"Philippe! Look at me again."

Too many things had to be crowded into a few uneasy minutes. Had they been able to talk at leisure, had even the light been such that they could see each other properly, instead of this furtive gloom, it would have made things easier. As it was, they confronted each other almost like enemies.

"Martine!" Philippe cried impulsively, and there was something in his voice that made her waver. He realized that her nerves were on the stretch, that she couldn't go on standing bare-footed, shivering in the night-breeze, very much longer; perhaps, in a moment, she would slip into his arms.

"I swear to you by all I hold most sacred," he began—then stopped abruptly.

She, too, grew rigid. A ribbon of light had just appeared under the door. Then another line of light flashed out, at a right angle to it, slowly widening.

Instinctively Martine gripped Philippe's arm. He had not presence of mind enough to retreat behind the curtain.

A young voice, level, unperturbed, but oddly remote and dream-like, came through the silence.

"Martine! Are you there? What's happening?"

And they saw the tall, slim form of a boy in pyjamas outlined against the light flooding in from his bedroom door as he peered through the shadows towards them.

"Martine!" he called again.

"Hush, Kiki. Yes, I'm here."

Neither she nor Philippe dared to move. Kiki groped his way forward, bare-footed, still half asleep. When he saw Philippe he came to a sudden stop and stared hard at his face.

"Kiki!" Martine whispered.

Everyone in the house called him by this pet name; it was as if they felt his father's Christian name was too august for a small boy.

"It's all right, Kiki. Don't . . ."

Suddenly he started sobbing violently, putting his hand over his mouth to stifle the sound. His sister slipped her arm round his shoulders and tried to draw him to her.

"Hush, Kiki. If mamma heard . . ."

But he went on sobbing, and at last, in a paroxysm of childish despair, sank on to the floor. His sister crouched beside him, stroking his hair.

"There, there, Kiki. There's nothing to worry about." Glancing up, she said to Philippe: "You'd better go. I can manage him."

"But—"

"No. He'll be all right once you've gone."

Every time the boy looked at the intruder he was seized by a sort of convulsion, and his limbs started twitching.

"You see. Please go, Philippe."

Swinging his legs over the window-sill, Philippe dropped lightly on the sodden, leaf-strewn turf. The experience had been unnerving, but, once outside, he took a calmer view. "Anyhow, it's for Martine to fix things up with her brother. He's only a kid; she'll manage it."

Glancing back on his way through the garden, he saw again the glimmering rectangle of Martine's window. Once on the lawn, he quickened his pace, then pushed open the little door in the wall, which closed again behind him without his touching it.

At the same moment he heard a voice, the other's, calling his name.

"Yes?"

"Come, Philippe." Urgent fingers tightened on his arm.

His thoughts were in chaos. He felt as if he'd left behind him, in that big, silent house, a bomb that might explode at any moment. Suddenly all the lights would go on, and there would be a burst of excited voices, hurried footsteps—a gathering of the clan!

But nothing happened. Nothing broke the stillness but the slow, deep rhythm of the flood, and, now and again, the shrill creak of a pulley-block, sounding like a seagull's mew.

He hardly knew what he was doing, where he was being led. Only fear possessed him—and an immense disgust. What a foul business it had been, for all these months, having to humour Charlotte so as to keep in touch with Martine! Having to buy her connivance, not with money, but with lies, a pretence of devotion—hardly even that! All he had done was deliberately, cold-bloodedly, to stir the woman's senses, play on her passion. Yes, a foul business!

As usual, she took him to the trellised arbour covered with rambler roses in the centre of the grounds. Flowers and leaves, all were fallen, and the arbour looked like a big, derelict umbrella with only the ribs left. It was swept by the wet sea-winds, and the wicker couch dripped with moisture.

“Listen, Philippe . . .”

That was how Martine, too, had begun. What was it that both of them wanted so urgently to convey to him?

“I can't endure it any more. I'm so miserable. Oh, Philippe, if you would only understand . . .!”

She said that every time. Happily he couldn't see her face. On previous nights he had summoned up the courage to give his lips to her mouth's kiss, to put his arm round her skimpy shoulders, to murmur foolish, conventional endearments. But tonight . . .

“Don't you understand that, placed as I am, I . . .?”

No, tonight he was in no mood for explanations. He was waiting for the explosion; expecting every moment to see the windows of the house beyond the wall blaze out, one after the other. . . . But, still, nothing happened.

He pictured Martine kneeling beside her young brother on the carpet, her arm round his neck, and he wondered what she was whispering in his ear. Probably both were crying, mingling words with sobs. She was pleading with him, saying things that made

her blush for shame, while the boy grappled with a nightmare, like those strange dreams he had when walking in his sleep. For Martine had told Philippe that her brother was a sleep-walker, and for that reason the windows of his bedroom had been fitted with bars.

“And all the time I know that you love that girl, that you’re only using me as a tool . . .”

“Of course not,” he murmured weakly. “You’ve got it all wrong, Charlotte.”

“But it’s true—and I sometimes feel quite desperate. Tell me, what did she say? What did you do together just now?”

“Don’t . . .!”

“I’ve been thinking. Monsieur Donadieu hasn’t come back. I can’t help wondering . . .”

In her voice he seemed to detect the same suspicion as he had heard in Martine’s. For some moments he kept silence, gazing up at leafless boughs, draggled clouds racing across the cold translucent sky. Then almost angrily he turned on her.

“That’s enough, Charlotte.”

“Yes, I’ve been thinking quite a lot. And I’d like to know . . .”

He made a brusque movement. At all costs he must stop Charlotte from voicing her thoughts, and, to silence her, he lived through one of the most odious half-hours of his life, while his eyes kept straying to the windows—that remained in darkness.

II

OSCAR DONADIEU’s body was discovered by a cartman at nine on Thursday morning. Rain was still falling, but there was a silvery sheen above the sea that stung one’s eyes and showed up intervening objects in sharp relief. Driven by a north-wester, the long, grey-green Atlantic waves were casting showers of dazzlingly white spray upon the jetties, and the house-fronts gleamed whitely in the level light.

It was a morning when La Rochelle resembled, in almost every detail, the old prints on the walls of Mme Brun’s drawing-room.

The tide was down, and there was hardly any water in the harbour. The fishing-boats had gradually settled into the brown expanse of mud, seamed by tiny channels.

A girl in black was setting out the shoes in a boot-shop window. From eight in the morning Michel Donadieu had been working in his office on the first floor of the Donadieu building. He had glanced at the clock several times, wondering when he could decently ring up the Public Prosecutor, no early riser, and ask if he had any news.

For the last few minutes, however, his thoughts had been elsewhere, as Benoit, the cashier, had just come in with a sheaf of vouchers to be signed. Benoit, who had been with the firm for thirty years, and was one of its most trusted employees, had one defect: his breath smelt. And when, as now, Michel was sitting at his desk, with the cashier bending over him as he laid the vouchers one after the other on the blotting-pad, this was painfully noticeable. But no one had ever ventured to inform Benoit of his infirmity, and it was of this that Michel was thinking as he scrawled his signature, with its ornate terminal flourish, on the slips before him.

His brother-in-law, Jean Olsen, who managed the Fisheries department, had been summoned to the railway-station, where some complications had arisen over a refrigerator-van.

The cartman, whose name was Bigois, had just had his first drink of the day at a small tavern in the Fishmarket and, whip on shoulder, was walking in front of his horse along the quayside. A moment came when he felt impelled to spit, and instinctively he moved to the sea-wall and leant over.

A yellowish object in the mud, a little way out, caught his eye. It was a light overcoat, and, observing it more closely, Bigois was almost sure he saw a hand protruding from a sleeve.

“Gosh!” he exclaimed, but without much real interest. “That’s mighty like a stiff!”

It was in the same terms that he reported his find to the policeman at the corner, his moustache still wet from the second glass of white wine he had taken on the way.

The corpse lay in the awkwardest place imaginable, where there

were several feet of particularly viscous mud. The policeman gazed at it with a dubious air, then turned and looked enquiringly at a couple of fishermen who had come up beside him.

“You’ll need a push-board,” said one of them.

“What’s that?”

By now some ten people had collected and were gazing at the yellow lump in the mud, hardly realizing what it was. Nobody seemed disposed to make a move, and the policeman was still uncertain what to do. It was again a fisherman who put in a word.

“There ain’t no time to lose. Tide’s making, and once it gets him . . .”

At last the policeman came to a decision. Walking briskly to the nearest café, he rang up headquarters. By the time he got back a push-board had been produced—a boat-shaped contraption, like a very wide ski, that glided over the mud without sinking. An ancient mariner in a sou’wester navigated this queer craft, but when he brought it up beside the body, he found it impossible to lift Oscar Donadieu out of the mud, that held like birdlime.

Meanwhile a crowd had gathered, and for a good quarter of an hour they lingered in the pouring rain, gaping at the mudflat; the driver of the Rochefort ‘bus, to his annoyance, had to make a start before seeing the end of it. There was time enough for the Superintendent of Police to arrive, but he, too, did no more than stand by and watch some fishermen making a rope fast round the body and hauling it up on to the quay.

He was aghast when he saw who the dead man was, and furious with himself for having failed to supervise operations more attentively. For, in the process of being dragged up the sea-wall, the corpse had been rather badly damaged.

Reluctant to leave the body lying on the roadside, they placed it on Bigois’ cart, and someone unearthed a tarpaulin, reeking of fish, to cover it. After that, the Superintendent dashed off to the Donadieu building, slowing down, however, to a more seemly gait as he approached it. He was shown at once into the office, where Michel, who was still signing cash vouchers, failed at first to grasp his meaning.

“I have the painful duty of informing you . . .”

The walls were papered with imitation leather and adorned with coloured sketches of boats flying the Donadieu House Flag. Michel rose slowly to his feet and gazed blankly at the Superintendent for some moments ; he had not the faintest idea of the procedure to be followed in such cases. Bleak light fell on his temples, from which the hair was receding, and glinted on the massive gold signet-ring on his left little finger.

He turned to his cashier.

“Ring up the goods-station and ask Monsieur Olsen to come back at once.”

It seemed to him desirable that his brother-in-law also should be present, and he had half a mind to ring up his mother as well—but mightn’t it seem rather brutal to break the news over the ‘phone ?

“Where do you wish the body to be taken ?” the Superintendent asked.

“Where is it now ?”

Rather shamefacedly, the police-officer confessed :

“Oh—er—on a cart.”

“Where is the cart ?”

“Over there.” He pointed to the far end of the wharf.

But when they went to the window and looked out, they saw Bigois and the cart immediately below ; he had evidently thought he would save time by coming at once. Michel dabbed his eyes vaguely with his handkerchief, though there were no tears in them. Still, he felt like weeping, and under other circumstances would certainly have done so. But the setting was wrong ; indeed, there was a lack of dignity about it all that ruled out any show of emotion.

“If it had been anyone but your esteemed father, I’d have had the body taken to the Morgue, as is usual in such cases.”

Obviously that was out of the question. On the other hand, perhaps it would be irregular to suggest having the body conveyed to the house. Michel was still wondering what to do when the cashier returned.

“Monsieur Jean will be here in a minute, sir.”

“Call up the Public Prosecutor, please.”

All the staff throughout the building had stopped work. A lady who had come to order coal couldn’t get anyone to serve her.

Down in the street the crowd were keeping at a respectful distance from the tarpaulin-shrouded cart; some had gone so far as to take their hats off, under their umbrellas.

Michel gave a hasty explanation to the Public Prosecutor over the 'phone. After which he turned to the Superintendent.

"He says we'd better bring the body in here. The police-surgeon will be round in a few minutes. . . . Will you sit down?"

And so, borne by two members of his staff and Bigois, who, being the most expert in handling heavy weights, took command, Oscar Donadieu entered his office for the last time. Instinctively Bigois had made as if to lay the body on the big mahogany desk; then, realizing that it was plastered with mud, he changed his mind and placed it on the floor. Jean Olsen came rushing in, whipped off his hat, and asked:

"Does mother know?"

"Not yet."

It was all so chaotic and—happily enough—unprecedented that no one knew what to do, what attitude to adopt. So far no tears had been shed. The members of the staff were anxious to manifest their sympathy in some way, but had no idea how to set about it. It was the door-porter who suggested that the offices should be closed and a notice of decease put on the door.

Michel approved at once.

"Quite right. Yes, we'll have the blinds down. . . . You agree, Jean?"

The next problem was whether to keep the employees at work behind the drawn blinds or send them home.

"I've my monthly accounts to write up," Benoit, the cashier, put in.

"In that case, you'd better stay. All the others can go home, except those whose presence is absolutely necessary. . . . Oh, good morning, Monsieur Jeannet."

At last the representative of the Law had come; he was accompanied by the police-surgeon, a florid, thick-set man in his forties.

"I need hardly say how deeply . . ." the official began stiffly.

What everyone present felt was, above all, acute embarrassment. The situation had found them unprepared.

"Couldn't he be placed on a table?" asked the doctor, as he took off his overcoat.

Bigois was still standing by, probably hoping for a tip. But did one give a tip in such cases? Michel wondered; and, having no idea, did nothing.

"I suggest, gentlemen, that you leave the room while I'm making my examination."

Accordingly the three men, Michel, his brother-in-law, and the Public Prosecutor, adjourned to Michel's office. Michel handed round cigarettes. Now that the corpse was no longer under their eyes they found it easier to talk.

"Do you think the body can have been in the water ever since last Saturday night?"

"What puzzles me," Olsen replied, "is why it wasn't carried out to sea."

But really there was nothing surprising about that. The entrance to La Rochelle harbour is a narrow one, between the heads of two jetties. The tides had merely shifted Oscar Donadieu's body from one side of the harbour to the other, a foot or two beneath the surface of the water. Finally, as chance would have it, it had stranded on a mudbank, at the ebb.

Michel Donadieu was a stout, loosely built man, who, to conceal his ungainliness perhaps, always dressed with extreme neatness. He was subject to fits of dizziness—there was said to be something wrong with his heart—and was always wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"I suppose I'll have to go and tell mother," he muttered.

Though no one dared to say it in so many words, or even admit it frankly to himself, all of them felt relieved now that the mystery of the old man's disappearance had been cleared up.

Once the doctor had finished with his inspection of the body in the office below, there would be nothing more to worry about. They heard him calling up the stairs, but he only wanted the Public Prosecutor, who hurried down to join him. Olsen was pacing restlessly up and down the room. Michel's face was oddly twisted, and he would have liked to shed some tears at last, if only for appearance' sake.

When the Prosecutor returned, followed by the burly doctor, he was wearing his most professional air.

"I much regret, gentlemen, that it should be necessary to prolong your suspense, but we have found it impossible, so far, to form any definite opinion. The doctor wished me to inspect the body for myself. In its present state of advanced decomposition—you must excuse my bluntness . . ."

"Don't mention it. We quite understand."

" . . . it is difficult to determine precisely the cause of death. In a word, I should be failing in my duty were I not to insist on a *post-mortem*. However, I may say this much: so far as we can judge from a cursory inspection, there's no reason to believe that a crime has been committed."

In a way, of course, this made things easier. Now that the Law had intervened, there was a cut-and-dried procedure to be followed. A police-ambulance came for the body. Michel and Olsen were back at the house in the Rue Réaumur at exactly a quarter to eleven.

"Is your mistress in?" Michel asked the maid.

"She's in her bedroom, sir."

"Please ask her if she can come; we have something to tell her."

But it was Martine who came first, a music-album in her hand, and to her Michel blurted out the news.

"Father's body has been found."

She had no opportunity of asking for details before Mme Donadieu entered, in a sky-blue dressing-gown and a lace cap. She glanced at the two men and the girl, then took a deep breath and pressed her hands to her heart.

"Tell me what it is. Quick! Your father . . . I dreamt about him last night."

And now at last it was like a real bereavement. Michel made no effort to keep back his tears. Mme Donadieu went very pale, closed her eyes, and sank into a chair, half fainting, while Martine rushed to the kitchen for some vinegar and a wet towel. Eva, Michel's wife, hurried into the room to see what was happening, and she, too, burst into tears; then exclaimed:

"We mustn't let the children come down. Martine dear, please run up and lock the door."

The cook had entered, and was sobbing noisily. The big carpet had been rolled up that morning for the parquet to be beeswaxed, and they were penned together in a corner of the drawing-room. One had the impression of a crowd, with everyone getting in everyone's else's way.

"Where's Kiki?" Mme Donadieu asked suddenly. "The poor child must be told."

She was informed that he had gone out early, without a word to anyone—which was unlike him.

When, some minutes later, he returned, his face drawn and pale, his shoes caked with mud, his hair sopping wet—he hadn't even thought of putting on a cap—he found an atmosphere of gloom.

"You'd better have something to eat," the cook kept repeating. "You must keep your strength up."

But no one, except Michel, who always had an appetite, took her advice. Standing, he ate some slices of cold beef, without bread or vegetables.

"When will he be brought here?"

"When they've finished the . . . the . . ."

Somehow, no one liked to voice the ugly term *post-mortem*. From time to time Eva went upstairs to attend to her two-year-old daughter. Her small boy, Jean, and Olsen's son, Maurice, who had somehow found their way downstairs, added to the confusion.

It was Martine and her brother, Kiki, who looked most upset; their faces were almost deathlike. After a while Martine slipped out; some time elapsed before she was discovered lying on her bed, her body rigid, her teeth clenched on a corner of the pillow-case.

The *Courrier Rochellois* gave some details :

"On leaving his Club in the Place d'Armes, M. Oscar Donadieu invariably followed the same route. Instead of going straight home he had a habit of making a *détour* and walking past his office building and warehouses. It was a dark and rainy night and he may well have lost his footing . . ."

It was so. Old Donadieu had settled habits—with advancing years he had become more and more the creature of routine—

and this was one of them. Probably it pleased him, on his way home to bed, to have a final glimpse of the huge block of offices looming up through the darkness, his sheds and warehouses, the funnels of his steamers ; they were so many symbols of the wealth and eminence of the House.

Little was said about it at the Club. All the members were elderly, for the most part of the same age as Oscar Donadieu, and they came to the Club not so much for company as to spend a few hours ensconced in a favourite armchair in front of an open fire, in an atmosphere unlike that at home. One could tell they were men of substance and assured position by their grave demeanour and the measured terms in which they discussed even the most trivial subjects. Not that they wasted much time on trivialities ; they knew each other too well for that. For they had grown up together, gone to the same schools and universities ; indeed, most of them, as a result of intermarriages between the clans, were more or less nearly related to each other.

As Oscar Donadieu had been President of the Club, it was resolved at a special meeting of the committee on the Thursday afternoon that the Club was to remain closed for a week in token of respect for their late President. Then, with the same decorum, they sanctioned an outlay of five hundred francs for a wreath.

Frédéric Dargens was present and voted with the others. It all went so smoothly that an outsider would never have guessed that there was anything beneath the surface ; that, only an hour before, Dargens had been in the Public Prosecutor's office, undergoing examination.

The most an acute observer might have detected was a certain eagerness, on the part of some of the members, to leave the room without having to shake hands with Dargens. And perhaps he might also have noticed some curious glances directed at the cinema-proprietor's handsome, finely moulded face, with the hair slightly greying at the temples, and the sinuous, humorous lips.

“You must excuse me, Monsieur Dargens, for having sent for you, but I am informed that you left the Club in the company of Oscar Donadieu on Saturday night.”

The Public Prosecutor, too, was politeness itself. True, the more conservative members of the community deplored the fact that Dargens owned and personally managed a picture-house—and one, at that, where there was a music-hall turn between the films, with acrobats, dancers, and the like. Likewise the fact that, instead of having a proper residence, he camped out somewhere in his cinema, and made no attempt to control the doings of his son, Philippe, who was rumoured to be getting into bad ways.

There were other things against him; for instance, that he let himself be seen about in cafés with professional dancers and cabaret artistes. Sometimes he even took them out for the day in his car, to one or other of the neighbouring seaside resorts. Even his style of dressing was regrettable; too exotic and Parisian, it clashed with the local standards of good taste.

Nevertheless, he was a member of the Club, which his father had founded and presided over until old Donadieu succeeded him. Moreover, until the previous year, the Dargens Bank had been regarded as quite the soundest of the local private banks, and many of the leading families of the district had accounts in it. Even when the crash came and the bank had to close its doors, the liquidators could but admit that Dargens had acted in good faith, and that the failure was due to sheer bad luck. He had sold everything he possessed—cars, horses, the big country house at Marsilly and the modernistic residence he had run up in the new quarter of La Rochelle—to meet his liabilities, and had gone far to covering them.

Really, what his fellow-clubmen had most against him was this idea of starting a picture-house.

"That is quite correct, Monsieur Jeannet. I left the Club with Donadieu, we walked together as far as the Rue Gargoulleau, and he turned down it, after wishing me 'good-night.'"

"Did you go straight home?"

"To the cinema, you mean? Yes." (Why go out of his way to stress this rather embarrassing detail?)

"But," the Prosecutor pointed out, "wasn't the Rue Gargoulleau the shortest way home for you as well?"

"Certainly—but you know what Donadieu was like. I gathered

from his manner that he'd rather be alone, so I took the longer way, by the Rue du Palais."

"Did Donadieu lose much money when your bank failed?"

"He was paid eighty francs in the hundred, like all the other creditors."

It was a distasteful task, having to question Dargens in this fashion. However much one hardened one's heart against him, one couldn't but be taken by the man; for one thing, he had such perfect poise, was so obviously well-bred. Perhaps, too, the faint aura of bohemianism that hovered round him contributed to his charm; it was so foreign to the drab, humdrum environment of La Rochelle.

Twenty years previously, his wife, who came of a good local family, had run away with a dentist. This was most difficult to account for, considering how popular Dargens was with the women-folk of the town, in every walk of life.

"I must ask you, once more, to excuse me for questioning you in this manner. But I wanted to make quite sure that—how shall I put it?—that no scope is given for malicious rumours, once the inquest is over. You see what I mean?"

On leaving the Prosecutor's office, Dargens walked straight to the Rue Réaumur and rang the Donadieus' bell. He showed no sign of discomposure.

It was, perhaps, the busiest and most trying moment of the day for the bereaved household. Maître Jeannet had just rung up to say that the police-surgeon's report had come in. No injury inflicted before death had been found on the body, and the authorities were satisfied that the death was due to misadventure. It was, therefore, for the family to make immediate arrangements for the funeral, and when Dargens stepped into the hall he heard Michel speaking at the telephone in his rather squeaky voice:

"Yes, bring the patterns at once, please. Black tweed—that's right, isn't it? We shall require—wait!—two, no, three men's suits, and two for the children. Yes, tomorrow evening at the latest."

A black dress sprawled on the sofa, and Mme Donadieu was inspecting it, with her daughter-in-law.

"I assure you, mamma," Eva was saying, "I can't possibly wear it again."

It was Martine who first noticed Dargens's entry, and she promptly looked away; then hurried off to her bedroom.

"I've come to see you . . ." Dargens began.

There was a brief hesitation; a slight tension in the air. Then Mme Donadieu cried impulsively, hardly knowing what she was saying:

"My poor Frédéric! It's . . . it's very nice of you. . . ."

Meanwhile Michel was dialling another number, while Olsen studied the Directory.

"I've come," said Dargens, "to see if I can be of any help. If you want any messages delivered or arrangements made, please don't hesitate to use me."

But they were no longer paying any attention to him—perhaps deliberately. He stayed a quarter of an hour; then, without betraying the least embarrassment, took his leave, while the undertaker was being shown into the room.

In the next house Mme Brun was being helped by Charlotte into a black dress before sallying forth on a visit of condolence.

It was still raining heavily. At the hospital a surgeon was patching up Oscar Donadieu's battered body as best he could before despatching it to the family.

The windows had alternate panes of greenish glass, and in the glaucous light faces showed in oddly sharp relief. All the persons in the lawyer's office seemed like graven figures, incapable of change. Martine, for instance, sitting very upright in her chair, with her slim white neck emerging from the blackness of her coat, and her pale, tense face—one could never picture her otherwise than as a young, highly strung girl. And her brother Kiki, too, with his thin nose that always seemed a shade askew, had such a decrepit air that one wondered if ever he would grow up into a normal man.

These two looked the most stricken; it was as if they bore on their young shoulders the whole weight of the tragedy; as if they were its only victims, the only orphans.

Behind them sat their uncle Batillat from Cognac—he had been appointed deputy guardian to the children—wearing a look of studied gloom.

Mme Donadieu alone seemed almost unconcerned. She gazed calmly at the notary, who was opening the Will with deliberate slowness, while Michel and Olsen, looking slimmer than usual in their mourning clothes, affected, without great success, an air of bland indifference.

“This Will was deposited with me by the deceased two years ago, and we may presume, I take it, that he made no subsequent Will.”

He paused and glanced at Mme Donadieu, who nodded.

Then he started reading in the slow, unemphatic tones appropriate to such occasions. A moment came when Mme Donadieu gave an involuntary exclamation.

“I beg your pardon :”

“Shall I read the passage again? ‘I devise my entire estate to my children, Michel, Marthe Olsen (*née* Donadieu), Martine, and Oscar. . . .’”

It cost Michel an effort not to turn and stare at his mother, whose breath he could hear coming in quick gasps.

“‘No part or parcel of the real or personal estate shall be alienated before all the children are of age.’” Michel knitted his brows as if trying to work out the implications of this clause; his mother leant more heavily on her stick. “‘Provided that, should there arise at any time an urgent need for the conversion of some part of the estate into ready money, before the youngest of the heirs has attained his majority, a sale may take place; but it shall cover the whole estate, including the goodwill of the various businesses as well as the various premises thereto appurtenant.’”

All of a sudden Martine realized that something strange was happening, gazed at her mother, and for the first time tried to catch the drift of what the lawyer was reading.

“‘My wife shall enjoy a life-interest of one-fourth of the total income accruing . . .’”

Slowly Mme Donadieu raised her hand to her forehead, hid her eyes, and stayed thus, without moving. The lawyer became

slightly flustered and stumbled over the long, concluding phrases, in haste to get it over.

Michel was the first to rise.

“Mother!” he murmured awkwardly.

But she did not look up, and kept her eyes still hidden.

“How about opening the window for a bit?” the lawyer suggested. “It’s rather close in here.”

Martine, who had risen to her feet, asked impulsively:

“I say, what exactly does it mean? I didn’t follow.” Olsen signed to her to hold her tongue, but she went on: “Does it mean that mamma is . . . is disinherited?”

And then at last Mme Donadieu let them see her face.

“Yes,” she said quietly.

“No, mother!” Michel hurried to put in. “It’s hardly that. A quarter of the income goes to you for life, and none of us can touch the capital.”

The lawyer, who was on his feet, looked uncomfortable. Olsen, as he was only an “in-law,” thought it best to say nothing.

“Come along, mother!” Michel began putting on his gloves.

“We’ll talk it over at home; I’ve no doubt—”

“Talk *what* over?”

“You know what I mean. We’ll fix things up between us.”

The uncle from Cognac looked thoroughly puzzled; Kiki was casting mistrustful glances at the grown-ups.

Somehow Mme Donadieu conjured up a smile. Leaning on her stick, she drew herself up, murmuring:

“A quarter of the income!”

Paying no heed to the others, she walked slowly to the door, and never had she looked so stately, so tall and majestic.

“Oh, mamma!” cried Martine, bursting into tears.

“Mamma!” echoed Kiki shrilly. The tension in the air had affected him too; his nerves were giving way.

At first their mother took no notice of Kiki and his sister. When at last she turned, it was to give them a severe look.

“What’s come over you, children?”

“Oh, mamma!” Martine sobbed, unable, it seemed, to get

another word out. While her uncle tried to calm her, Michel scowled.

"Now then, Martine! Don't behave like a silly child. . . . We'll talk about all this presently."

The click of typewriters could be heard in an adjoining room, where four clerks and a typist were at work. They had to cross this room, to leave. Mme Donadieu turned again to her daughter and said sharply :

"Don't make an exhibition of yourself, Martine! Stop crying." She rarely adopted such a tone with her children; only when seriously displeased.

Augustin, the chauffeur-valet, was waiting with the car. It was five in the afternoon. A miniature roundabout, for children only, had been set up in the open space in front of the notary's office, and was getting under way, but there were as yet no children on the wooden horses.

Martine ran through the outer office, pressing her hands to her face to hide her tears. No sooner was she home than she had a nervous breakdown, all but going into hysterics. She had always been liable to attacks of this kind. Her body was shaken from head to foot, her jaws clenched so fiercely that one feared her teeth would break. She began to make convulsive movements, jerking her limbs and digging her nails into her palms till the blood came.

Mme Donadieu brought her stick down with a bang.

"Stop that nonsense! Do you hear?"

But this only made things worse. Martine continued writhing on the floor, clutching at her mother's skirts. Michel said to Olsen :

"Ask your wife to come, please."

Marthe was the only one who could manage her sister at such times. Kiki had retired to a corner and was sitting there, gazing at the others with big, frightened eyes.

Olsen ran out and shouted up the staircase :

"Marthe! Come down! You're wanted."

The smell of wax candles and chrysanthemums still lingered in the air. But the house had been tidied up; everything was back

in its usual place. Mme Donadieu took off her black hat and gloves, and gazed calmly round her; then said in a voice they hardly recognized as hers :

“Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to be alone.”

A big picture hung on the drawing-room wall, showing her beside her husband, a bunch of roses in her hand. This portrait had been given her by her children in commemoration of their parents’ silver wedding. Twelve years had passed since that anniversary, but Oscar Donadieu in his black frock-coat, with the Legion of Honour rosette on the lapel, looked exactly the same as he had done on the day of his death; a tall, austere, impressive figure, with a look in his eyes that no one, not even his wife perhaps, had ever comprehended.

Lying on the floor, Martine was crying passionately :

“I won’t! I won’t leave mamma!”

Her sister Marthe, who had her father’s grave imperturbability, tried to draw her to her feet.

“What’s come over her?”

“Oh, nothing really. . . . We’ll tell you later.”

Seated beneath the portrait, still holding her stick, Mme Donadieu was beginning to lose patience.

“Look here! Am I to have any peace, or am I not?”

Martine sprang to her feet abruptly, stared at her mother, at the portrait, then swept her eyes round the familiar room.

“Mamma!” she began excitedly. “I can’t bear it! I want . . .”

“Go away at once, please. I wish to be alone.”

Events had moved too fast. The faces of all were flushed. No one knew what to do next, and for some moments they gazed at each other helplessly. Then Olsen said to his wife, “Come!” and, taking her arm, led her out into the hall and up the staircase.

“Why’s Martine in such a state?” Marthe asked.

“I’ll explain when we’re upstairs.”

Michel had already slipped away, and the old uncle had retreated to the dining-room, for want of anywhere else to go.

After a final glance at her mother, a glance in which flickered a vague hope that died out at once, Martine ran off to her bedroom

and shut herself in. Mme Donadieu remained seated beneath the portrait, and, huddled in an armchair at the other end of the room, the small boy stared at her, his eyes big with alarm.

"You too, Kiki," his mother said irritably. And when he didn't seem to understand what she meant, she lost her temper. "For heaven's sake, go away. I don't want you here."

No one had any dinner that night, except the Olsens, who had put their son to bed earlier than usual, so as to be able to speak more freely.

On the first floor Michel had a severe attack of palpitations; he was subject to such attacks, and they always terrified him, and set him whimpering like a child.

III

BEFORE the small door wedged between the Alhambra and the adjoining sweet-shop had given its usual premonitory creak, Dargens had heard the sound of approaching footsteps and at once knew them for his son's.

There were many such sounds he knew, for he suffered from insomnia and rarely got any sleep till night was nearly over. But no one knew this. He always turned in at a normal hour. Lying on the sofa which served him as bed, he would read for hours, and few sounds from the night-bound town escaped him.

But it was later, when, after putting his light out, he was making his first attempt to sleep, that his senses became preternaturally acute. He took no sleeping-draughts, nor was he one of those who are always bemoaning their inability to sleep, and start the day with haggard, bloodshot eyes, inviting pity.

He had not the knack of sleeping, that was all—and there was nothing for it. Stretched on the sofa, he waited patiently, sometimes with his eyes wide open, for the passing of the night. He heard the fishing-fleet put out to sea with the flood tide, and could identify the siren of each trawler.

Only with the first stir of life in the streets of La Rochelle did he doze off, like a sentry whose relief has come at last. Since he never

rose before ten, everyone imagined him to be a man who took life easily; even his son, knowing nothing of his insomnia, shared this belief.

This was the fifth consecutive night that Philippe hadn't come home till one. He had started this habit—for a habit it had become—two days after old Donadieu's funeral, and, lying on the sofa in his darkened room, Frédéric was wondering what could be the explanation.

On this particular night he noticed a slight difference from previous nights. When closing the street door, Philippe forgot to put up the safety-chain, and he spent some time fumbling for the light-switch, like a man under the influence of drink or some violent emotion. After this, his father could follow his movements step by step.

The Alhambra was still under construction, and portions of the old houses which had occupied its site remained, amongst them being the narrow passage which Philippe now had entered. It was cluttered up with packing-cases, stage-sets, and the like, and as a rule Philippe advanced warily. Tonight he did not seem to trouble what he did. At the end of the passage he all but fell over a strip of scenery, kicked it aside, then tramped heavily up the staircase and flung open the first door, which led into the gallery.

"He's forgotten to turn off the light," Frédéric murmured to himself.

Philippe had still to cross the gallery, climb a row of seats, and turn into a narrow corridor beside the operator's room. Finally he had to traverse the attic in which his father slept and beyond which lay the recess, hardly larger than a ship's cabin, which had been fitted up as his sleeping-quarters.

He had no notion that Frédéric's eyes were open. After walking past the sofa on which his father lay he entered his own room, closing the door behind him. Here, too, he didn't act as usual, but flung himself fully dressed on the bed. After some moments he changed his mind, sat up and took off his shoes, letting them drop noisily on the floor.

From now on Frédéric listened intently, for he could hear his son talking to himself, muttering phrases that sounded like im-

precations. Then, suddenly, his mood changed and he fell to sobbing violently, and thumped his pillow with his fist.

And now Frédéric swung himself on to the edge of the sofa and pricked up his ears like an animal that has heard in the distance the cries of another of its kind. Never before had he known his son to weep—even as a small boy Philippe had seemed quite impervious to grief—and the sound of his son's sobbing had a curious effect on Frédéric; in a way it gratified him, for it showed that the young man was human after all.

There were still broken phrases between the sobs, but it was impossible to make out the words. Philippe had switched on his lamp, a ribbon of light showed under the door, and half reluctantly Frédéric began to move towards it; he felt it was for him to do something.

On the threshold he hesitated. Just as he never mentioned his insomnia to anyone, so he always refrained from talking about his private affairs, and equally discouraged such expansiveness in others. For if there was one thing he loathed, it was anything in the nature of a "scene"—especially the kind of scene involving a parade of unkempt emotion. It outraged his sense of decency.

For some moments he waited, his hand on the door-knob, and, when at last he stepped into the room, he felt exceedingly embarrassed. As he entered, Philippe sat up abruptly on the bed and glared at his father. His cheeks had telltale patches of moisture, his eyes were dark with anger. He had torn off his tie, and it lay on the floor.

"What do you want?" There was a vicious edge to his voice. To keep himself in countenance, his father lit a cigarette. Though he had not turned on the light in his own room, he had contrived to slip a dressing-gown over his silk pyjamas; carelessness in dress was another of his antipathies. And the contrast was striking—between the older man's elegant attire, which might have graced the bedroom scene of a fashionable comedy, and his surroundings: the two dingy little bedrooms, littered with film-containers, tattered directories and documents of all sorts, some of them scattered on the floor.

"What do you want?"

As if to make it clear that he intended to stay for a while, Dargens swept the papers off a chair and sat down. For a moment, watching his son's set lips, he cast about for an opening.

Then "Didn't she let you in?" he asked. It cost him an effort to get the words out.

For the last twenty years, ever since his wife had left him, he had fought shy of topics of this order, cold-shouldered sentiment. Not that he was in any sense embittered. On the contrary, if his vaguely ironic smile superficially resembled that of the cynical man-about-town in a modern play, it had much more charity, indeed a real kindness, that embraced not only the young chorus-girls in shabby frocks who asked him for engagements, but his usherettes, and beggars in the street.

But now it was his son who was concerned, and he made no attempt to hide his anxiety.

"So you knew!" The young man bristled up at once. "Who told you? What have you heard?"

"That has no importance."

"Excuse me, it has great importance. Who told you about . . . all that?"

"No one, my boy."

"Ah! Then you've been spying on me!"

An ugly word to use. The fact that Dargens had, practically speaking, never had a heart-to-heart conversation with his son before, now made it all the harder. He had watched him growing up, following his bent, without ever intervening. It would have been, to his thinking, an indiscretion either to approve or to disapprove. That was another of his inhibitions, an invincible reluctance to meddle in another's life—even his own son's. Nettled by his silence, Philippe repeated angrily:

"So that's it. You've been spying on me. What a dirty trick!"

"I've not been spying. It was pure chance that . . ."

"What precisely do you know?"

Frédéric almost smiled; this was so typical of his son. A minute or two previously he had been weeping his heart out. And now, in a flash, because his pride had been ruffled, he had swung round to an aggressive mood, and was shrewdly trying to find out the

cards in his opponent's hand before committing himself. The older man had a sad, rather disillusioned smile.

"What do I know :" he repeated. "Everything, my dear boy. But you needn't feel alarmed. . . . For the last five nights she's kept her window shut—that's so, isn't it ?"

"Were you watching ?"

"Of course not. . . . But I know."

What his father had said was correct. For five consecutive nights Philippe had been making his usual incursion into Mme Brun's garden, running the gauntlet of Charlotte's embraces—only to find Martine's window shut each time. On this last night, greatly daring, he had gone so far as to tap on the pane, in half a mind to provoke a scandal, if there were no other way to gain his end.

The worst part of the whole business was the return journey, the certainty that Charlotte was lying in wait beside that little door in the wall, and knowing that she *knew*, and that her meagre breast was swelling with preposterous hopes.

All his efforts to see Martine in the daytime had failed, though he had waited hours on end at the corner of the Rue Réaumur. One morning he had even thought of going boldly to the front door and ringing the bell like an ordinary caller. But in all probability the door would be slammed in his face by Augustin. Old Donadieu, he knew, had announced in the presence of all the family :

"If ever that young ruffian has the nerve to set foot in this house again, I'll throw him out head foremost by the window !"

The reason being that, in the days when he used to see a good deal of the Donadieus, Philippe had tried to sponge on the old man in a particularly odious manner. He had explained that he needed money to send to his mother ; she had written to him from abroad, so he declared, saying that she was completely destitute. Then, going up to the first floor, he had played the same trick on Michel Donadieu.

Happily his father knew nothing of this. All old Donadieu had said to Frédéric was :

"You'd do well to keep an eye on your youngster. He's shaping badly."

And now, sitting on the edge of the bed, his face flushed with anger and despair, his hair tousled, Philippe was glaring at his father, who, the more embarrassed of the two, was fumbling for his words.

“Have you had a tiff?” Deliberately he chose the vaguest, least romantic term.

“No.”

“Then what’s gone wrong between you?”

At which Philippe felt an impulse to step-up the tone of the interview and show himself in better colours.

“Everything’s wrong,” he said bitterly, “and it’s because of you, if you must know.” Seeing the look of amazement on his father’s face, he went on: “Don’t you realize that all the family think it’s odd that you should have been the last person to be seen with Oscar Donadieu before his death? It’s common knowledge that you’re pressed for money, and you weren’t any better welcomed at the house than I was. Except, of course, by the old lady and the pretty daughter-in-law—to whom you’re making up, no doubt.”

“Really, Philippe!” his father exclaimed, but gently, without a hint of reproach.

“And I have to suffer for it! It’s too damned unfair! Martine’s changed completely; she suspects—all sorts of things. She even asked me point blank if it wasn’t I who . . .” His voice broke on a sob. And suddenly another fit of rage came over him, and he started gesticulating, shouting imprecations, at his father, the Donadieus, the world at large. . . .

But all the time he watched his father from the corner of his eye. And Frédéric, who on entering the room had looked more profoundly disturbed than Philippe had ever seen him before, was growing calmer every moment. Indeed there was now less concern than curiosity in his eyes as he watched his son’s extraordinary behaviour.

Casually he remarked, lighting another cigarette:

“And I thought you loved her!”

For a moment Philippe looked quite startled; then he retorted: “Who said I didn’t?”

Obviously there was nothing to be done, and, with a sigh, Frédéric rose. In the dressing-gown which had no like in La Rochelle, and silk pyjamas that would have at once shocked and delighted the worthy *bourgeoises* of that town, he cut a graceful, almost dandyish figure against a background of squalor and disorder.

"You're furious, you're sick as hell," he said slowly, "but you don't love her."

He regretted now having let himself be lured here, believing that his son's tears were due to real grief; that he needed consolation. Now he had found out his mistake, his one desire was to get away. Yes, it had been a disappointment, all the crueler because, in the darkness of his room, he had been simpleton enough to nurse illusions . . .

"Listen!" The young man had jumped to his feet and was barring the way to the door between the rooms.

Frédéric stood still and waited.

"I'm of age. I can do as I like. Promise me on your honour that you won't breathe a word to anyone, that you won't try . . ."

"Don't be a damned fool, Philippe," his father broke in, smiling in spite of himself, though he could feel his eyes moist.

But Philippe was not satisfied.

"No, I want you to give me your word of honour. I know you're very thick with the old lady. If you say a word to her about it—"

That was enough—too much, indeed. With a quick thrust of his arm, that showed the muscular force beneath his frail appearance, Frédéric pushed his son aside, went back to his room, closed his door—and, for the first time, locked it.

So this was how things were between them, and he knew it was his own fault in a way. Always that strange aversion he had had from meddling in his son's life—a sort of deference to others' foibles, or, perhaps, a sense of human dignity—had kept them at arm's length. And there was another, less obvious, reason for their estrangement. Watching the boy grow up to adolescence, he had sensed in his son a stronger, harder personality than his own, and he feared not only that any injudicious tampering might blunt its edge, but also that it might irrevocably turn against him.

a youngster who had already shown himself intractable, mistrustful of his elders.

And now his son had asked him “on his honour” not to betray his secret! Well, it only proved, once again, how little Philippe understood him.

He had turned on the light and was sitting at his desk, a cheap, mass-produced desk of the commonest pattern, littered with bills and writs.

For he was not yet rid of his embarrassments. He was walking a financial tight-rope, doling out small sums on account, resorting to all sorts of expedients to get equipment for his picture-house and to be supplied with films.

People who didn’t know him said: “Better take care! Dargens isn’t to be trusted.” And others: “He’s as proud as he used to be when he owned a country house, horses, cars, and all the rest of it.”

And actually there had been no great change in the man himself. He had been the arbiter of elegance in the town, the most sought-after guest, and he had a reputation of innumerable successes with women. He had known to perfection the art of living, and he knew it still; for he wasn’t in the least cast down by having to make shift with a poky little room, and to receive periodical visits from bailiff’s men. Usually, indeed, at these encounters, it was the bailiff’s men who ended up by eating humble pie, apologizing for their intrusion!

But Philippe was a tougher problem. He could hear him now, stamping up and down his little room, muttering to himself again, seething with rage—a young man up in arms against the world.

At four in the afternoon of the following day Frédéric Dargens was ringing the bell beside the massive outer gate of the Donadieu’s house in the Rue Réaumur. Augustin, the chauffeur-valet, who was in the kitchen, set in motion the mechanism that released the latch, and, after crossing the paved courtyard where the car had just been washed, Dargens climbed the steps and entered the hall.

“Madame is not at home,” Augustin informed him.

“I know. I’m going upstairs.”

The man-servant seemed put out at first; then gave a slight

shrug, as if to show he washed his hands of it. What a dolt the man is! Frédéric thought. Just the sort of well-meaning fool who paves the way for tragedies!

In old Donadieu's lifetime Frédéric had been a frequent caller, coming several afternoons a week. Mme Donadieu, with whom he had been friendly since his early youth, was always begging him to come round. For the life imposed on her by her husband was almost that of a recluse, and it was a welcome change to talk to someone who could retail the latest gossip of the town. Moreover, Frédéric was the only person she knew with whom she could speak frankly, in whom she could confide.

Not that she had much in the way of secrets, but she was a woman of great vitality, who would have wished to lead an active social life, to go to Paris once or twice a year, to travel; it was a relief to have someone who could appreciate her point of view, and understand the dreariness of her cloistered days, with their round of petty duties.

"My children don't understand me a bit," she would tell him. "They take after their father; Michel especially. When he was fifteen he made quite a business of dealing in stamps at school. Then he developed a craze for model ships in bottles. . . ."

Michel's present craze was the fourth of the series. He was never happy unless he had a hobby, and it had to be one of a sedentary order. When the ships-in-bottles phase was past, he had thrown himself with fervour into genealogical research. The walls of his drawing-room upstairs were plastered with armorial bearings, which he could explain as learnedly as any member of the Heralds' College, and he knew the family trees of all the leading families in that part of France.

For the last three months he had been a fervent addict of the game of yo-yo. After reading in the gossip column of a paper that the Prince of Wales was a yo-yo enthusiast, he had promptly sent to Paris for a selection of yo-yo sets of various types, and he played with them for hours in the evening, after the children were in bed.

When it was close on five, Mme Donadieu would say with a sigh:

"Now I mustn't keep you any longer, or Eva will be furious. . . ."

That was why Augustin's tone had been so disapproving. Dargens was friendly with both women, the mother and daughter-in-law, and his visits usually took place when the husbands were away, in office. He alone was free at five o'clock; after having tea on the ground floor, he went up to the next, where a glass of whisky awaited him.

If at such times Marthe, the elder daughter, wanted to see her mother for any reason, she would ask Augustin:

"Is he there?"

For in that case she preferred to wait rather than to risk encountering Dargens.

On this particular afternoon, however, knowing that Mme Donadieu had taken her husband's place in the office, Dargens went straight up the stairs and knocked at Eva's door.

"Come in, Frédéric. Sit here. . . . I'm feeling rotten. Don't expect me to get up and do the polite. Yes, help yourself. . . . Well, what's the latest news, my dear?"

The room he had entered was one which, not without much opposition from the family, Eva had got installed as a boudoir, for herself alone. Of a very different stock from that of the Donadieus—her maiden name was Grazielli—she was as slim and languorous as they were burly and austere. She gave an impression of extreme fragility, and an equally intense capacity for passion. Hers was a dusky beauty, like a Creole's, and on Frédéric's advice she had furnished her little boudoir on exotic lines; it would have suited a Venetian beauty of the Late Renaissance.

After kissing her hand, and helping himself to whisky, he had settled down on a cushion at her feet.

"Is Kiki better?" he asked.

"Yes. He may be getting up tomorrow or the next day."

On his return from the funeral, which had taken place in a downpour, the boy had had a shivering fit and been promptly sent to bed. He, too, was delicate; born when his mother was past forty and his father close on sixty, he had always been a difficult child, and of late his moodiness had become still more pronounced. His mother attributed this to growing-pains, Michel to defective

intelligence, while Olsen, more severe, said Kiki had a naturally disagreeable character. At present he was in bed, with symptoms of pneumonia, and Martine was at his bedside.

"You haven't seen my mother-in-law, I suppose?" Eva said.

"No. I hear she's working at the office daily."

"Yes, she started going there three days ago, and I wonder what will come of it. Michel is terribly fed up; he tells me she insists on being consulted over the most petty details, and answering the 'phone herself. In fact, she wants to boss the show! Her explanation is that, as Martine's and Kiki's guardian, she regards it as her duty to watch their interests. That's all very well, but—. Do you know, Frédéric, my life in this house is getting more impossible than ever. It's positively gruesome at times; I wonder I can stick it!"

Downstairs, Augustin, the faithful chauffeur-valet, was wagging his head in reprobation of this *tête-à-tête*—though actually nothing could have been more innocent than the relations between Eva and Dargens. Pretty though she was, she wasn't his type; he preferred women of a robuster build, more animated, less romantic. But as Michel's interests were so narrow—genealogies and yo-yo—this brief hour with Dargens was the one bright spot of her day. She would smoke cigarettes in a rather affected manner—they always made her cough—and contemplate Dargens, that ladies' man *par excellence*, seated respectfully at her feet, sipping the whisky she provided; an exotic drink by local standards.

"I haven't a notion what's really happening in the office. Needless to say, I'm not allowed to set foot in it. That's just like Michel; he's a sort of cheap edition of his father. Yesterday, when I told him I wanted a car of my own—after all, why shouldn't I have one?—what do you think he said? That it wasn't the moment for extravagance; on the contrary, we'd have to go slow for quite a while!"

The solitary window was curtained in heavy black material, the same as that of the sofa and the poufs, and no sounds from outside entered the small, dimly lit room.

"Give me another cigarette, please. Thanks. . . . The family are dreadfully worried, you know. It seems that no one really believes

it was an accident. My father-in-law knew every stone of that wharf, and it was most unlikely he'd trip over a hawser or a bollard or anything of that sort. He wasn't subject to fits of dizziness, and he was always so alert, wasn't he? My mother-in-law hasn't said outright that it can't have been an accident, but she's hinted as much to me. . . ."

"Has she?"

"And for the last four days there's been another thing to worry us."

Dargens kept quite quiet, as quiet as when, at night, he waited for sleep to come.

"It's Kiki. He's started walking in his sleep again. I hear he gets out of bed and goes to his sister's room. One night mother heard him asking, 'Where is he?'"

The cigarette between Frédéric's lips remained quite steady, as he gazed up at her enquiringly.

"They tried to get him to explain. But he wouldn't say a word. Twice his mother went to see him in his bedroom, when only Martine was with him. He started crying, but she couldn't get any explanation out of him. . . . What's your idea about it, Frédéric?"

"My idea?" His voice sounded so odd that she couldn't help laughing.

"Yes, you silly old thing! I wanted to know what you thought about—what I was telling you just now. I don't believe you heard a word of it. What was it I said?"

"That Kiki started crying. . . ."

"Yes—and what else?"

"That he wouldn't say why. . . . Probably he was feeling feverish."

"But that's not all." Eva lowered her voice. "Sure I'm not boring you with all this family gossip? But, you know, there's nobody else to whom I can talk quite freely. . . . I heard it from Nanny—what I'm going to tell you now."

The Nanny in question was the woman looking after Jean, who was five, and two-year-old Evette. The importation of the Nanny, a peasant woman from Luçon, had been another subject of dispute between Eva and her mother-in-law, for Mme Donadieu strongly

disapproved of wet-nurses, and refused to believe that Eva wasn't strong enough to suckle her own children.

"It was the day before yesterday, washing-day. All the washing, you know, for the three families, is done together, in an outhouse behind the garage. Two girls come from the town to do it, and we share the cost. . . . Sorry to inflict these details on you, Frédéric. You must be thinking, 'What a bore the woman is!'"

He made a deprecatory gesture. A ray of sunlight slanting down between the black curtains fell athwart one of Eva's satin slippers and a bare ankle.

"I've never seen these two girls who do the washing, except at a distance. My mother-in-law tells me it's getting harder every year to find reliable ones. Nanny goes there to do my little girl's washing, as I don't want her things to be washed with the others'."

She hesitated, watching Frédéric's face, to make sure he wasn't smiling at these explanations.

"All this sounds pretty trivial, I know; but, you'll see, it has its importance. . . . Well, Nanny was down at the wash-house for the afternoon, when suddenly my mother-in-law blew in and started telling the women off about the soap. I don't really know the truth of it, but it seems they weren't using the soap we give them, but a cheaper kind. Finally, my mother-in-law lost her temper and told the girls they were no better than thieves. Then one of them muttered under her breath, but loud enough to be heard:

"Anyhow, in *my* family there ain't no murderers!"

"You know what mother's like. That made her see red. She dropped her stick, went up to the girl and shook her soundly. Then she asked her what she meant by that remark."

Frédéric lit another cigarette, and took a sip of whisky, perhaps to keep himself in countenance.

"Sure I'm not boring you?"

"No. Go on, please."

"Oh, there's nothing much more to tell. The girl—she's our greengrocer's daughter, it appears—dried up when mother started in on her. All she had to say was:

"I dare say if some of the neighbours hereabouts told all they

knew, you wouldn't be so sure that Monsieur Donadieu fell into the water by accident.'

"Then she stamped off with her clogs on, and wouldn't even take her wages. The other girl who was working with her came to fetch her shoes that night.

"What do you make of it, Frédéric? Can you imagine what was in her mind?"

He took a quick puff at his cigarette, then shook his head.

"I could see Nanny was rather scared of telling me. I thought mother would say something about it to us, anyhow to Michel. If she did, he hasn't breathed a word of it to me. Tell me, Frédéric, do you think someone killed him?"

"Well, really . . ." He paused.

"Oh, I know you're in a difficult position, as you're my mother-in-law's friend as well. And I know, too, that I don't count in this house. I'm nothing, less than nothing. They'd never dream of letting me into their secrets. But I keep my eyes open, and during these last few days I've noticed a change. Marthe, for instance, hardly says a word to me, and we used to be fairly friendly —in a formal sort of way. In fact, I never see anyone to talk to, now. My father-in-law used to drop in sometimes to see the children; he hadn't much to say for himself, but it was better than nothing. Now it's like living in a block of flats where the tenants don't know each other."

She gave a sigh, then added dolefully:

"Oh, I'm so bored with this house, bored stiff! When I think of my mother's luck . . .! She's in Colombo now with her husband."

For Mme Grazielli, who had recently married again, was on her honeymoon, and sent her daughter picture-postcards from time to time.

"If he comes again, I'll tell everything. I'll tell them he killed papa!"

"But he didn't, Kiki. Really he didn't."

Kiki made no reply. He was feverish; one couldn't be sure if he really understood what he was saying. Or was he trying to

practise some childish form of blackmail on his sister? Martine couldn't make up her mind about it. It was she who was acting as Kiki's nurse, spending all day in the overheated bedroom, concocting malodorous poultices and measuring out medicines drop by drop. Kiki would doze for hours on end, and when he opened his eyes, stare vacantly at the ceiling. He had got into this habit when he was quite small—to be precise, at the time when he'd been kept in plaster for a year on account of spinal trouble.

They had begun by saying, "He's a backward child. But he'll catch up with his studies in time."

Actually he was backward only in certain respects. He was tall for his age and, in his sixteenth year, had already a light growth of down on his upper lip. At school he was handled gently because of his spinal complaint, and, if he got his remove at the normal age, it was mainly because he was the son of Oscar Donadieu.

He was, however, a voracious reader, tiring his eyes so much that in the evenings he had to wear spectacles for reading.

"Listen, Kiki. You've got it all wrong. I can assure you that Philippe didn't . . . didn't do anything to papa."

But he kept silent, and his eyes went blank. At such moments he really gave the impression that, as people sometimes said of him, he "wasn't quite all there."

"You love me, Kiki, don't you? Well, if you breathe a word of it to anyone, I'll kill myself straight away."

For which he found a typically childish retort:

"You can't. You haven't a revolver."

Martine, who had a quick imagination, promptly rejoined:

"I don't need one. I'll climb out on to the roof by the lumber-room and throw myself down into the yard. . . . But why are you so nasty to me, Kiki?"

"I don't want him to come here."

"But I've told you he won't come again."

"He came here—and then papa died."

That found her at a loss. The boy's mental processes had something baffling about them, a sort of perverted logic, and she had no idea how to rid him of his obsessions.

"He came here every night," Kiki continued. "I heard him."

"That's not true. . . . Only once or twice a week."

"That's it."

"What ever do you mean."

"He came here on that Saturday."

"No," she lied desperately. "I assure you, Kiki, he didn't come that Saturday."

They had to speak in undertones, and, when there were footsteps in the passage and the door-knob turned, stopped speaking altogether. On such occasions Martine put a finger to her lips and looked at Kiki beseechingly, but the boy disdained to make the least sign of assent.

Sometimes it was his mother who bustled in, casting suspicious glances at the two young people, seeming to fill the room with her commanding presence. Or else it was Michel, who paid these visits only out of a sense of duty, discoursed learnedly of pneumococci, and studied the temperature-chart with a knowing air. Or it might be Olsen, the most placid of the family, with all the Nordic gravity of his grandfather, who had come to France from Bergen at the age of twenty.

"Feeling better, sonny :" he would murmur vaguely, and go away almost at once. One could see he was always thinking "shop"; of tonnages of coal or frozen fish, of contracts and quotas.

"Kiki, do be nice. I'm your sister, aren't I? There's only we two. . . ."

She knew what she meant; in the big house, with families on every floor, they two were natural allies, a pair apart. Kiki, however, didn't understand, or understood differently, in his own way.

"We *three*," he corrected. "Anyhow, if he comes again I'll tell . . ." He was getting excited, his temperature rising; he sank back on to the pillow, his forehead moist with sweat. "I'll tell them that papa . . ."

"Hush! Someone's coming."

Hastily Martine picked up a compress from the bedside table and laid it on her brother's forehead, hiding his eyes.

IV

LAMPS were lit a little earlier every day; the town was settling down to the rhythm of winter on the Atlantic coast. A keener tang of brine came from the harbour, where the boats rocked higher on the flood, blocks and tackle creaking, and the little taverns on the wharfs reeked of hot grog and sodden serge.

In La Rochelle itself dark forms of women, countryfolk and residents, could be seen clustering like moths round the brightly lighted shop-windows; from the street one had glimpses of clerks bent over their desks under green-shaded lamps; and, in contrast with the animation of the central thoroughfares, the by-streets had a furtive air, and the rare gas-lamps served as meeting-points for loving couples, who presently retreated into the darkness of convenient doorways.

Light was showing in the windows of the Donadieu building on the Quai Vallin, including those of the ground floor, whose iron bars gave them the look of prison-windows. Had anyone climbed a mast of one of the schooners alongside the quay, he could have seen the faces of the people gathered in the big office that had been Oscar Donadieu's and now was his wife's.

An elbow resting on the table, a fat blue pencil in her right hand, she was presiding, with Michel sitting beside her, Olsen standing, and three other men, each with a sheaf of documents in front of him, facing her across the table. And when anyone called to see one of the Donadiers, the janitor informed him in his most official tone:

“I’m afraid you’ll have to wait, sir. The gentlemen are at a Board meeting.”

“Ah! Will it last long, do you think?”

Whereat the janitor made a vague gesture, indicating that the duration of such a gathering is unpredictable. With the result that in the waiting-room, with its scanty lights, hard horsehair seats, and spittoons discreetly in the background, quite a number of people kept on crossing and uncrossing their legs, casting admiring glances at a man who, like themselves, was waiting, but had had

the nerve to rise and pace the room, halting now and then to gaze at the photographs of colliers and trawlers hung on the walls.

At last a baize-lined door opened; then another just behind it in polished oak. Voices could be heard, of people taking courteous leave, and then a woman's crisp, clear tones :

"So that's settled. You'll all of you come to lunch tomorrow. Then we can thresh the matter out and, I hope, come to a decision."

The men other than the Donadieus could still be heard exchanging urbanities in the big entrance-hall, then on the steps.

"Can I give you a lift home?"

"No, thanks. I must call in at the office."

"I hope Madame Mortier's better."

"Much better, thanks. . . . And how's your son-in-law?"

Collars were turned up, as a drizzle had set in. The three men went on chatting for a minute or two, but their thoughts were elsewhere, and their eyes kept straying to the ground-floor windows.

"Good night," said Camboulives, adding in a whisper : "Well, we'll see what comes of it."

The office door had been closed by Michel, to the chagrin of the people in the waiting-room, who had hoped to be admitted once the meeting was over, and now had to sit down again. After closing the door, Michel walked to the fireplace and leant against the mantelpiece, on which stood a big black marble clock, while Olsen, who, after all, was only an "in-law," remained seated in a corner with folded arms. Both men were looking glum, and Mme Donadieu feigned astonishment as she resumed her seat at the desk.

"What's come over you?" she asked, gazing at each of the two men in turn.

For a moment neither spoke; then Michel said :

"Well, I can't help wondering how they feel about it. This idea of yours—of a business luncheon, I mean. I could see they were a bit startled already at having a woman to act as chairman at our meeting. . . ."

Each month there was a meeting of the leading coal-importers: the Camboulives group, the Varins, and the Mortiers—the principal business rivals of the Donadieus. Between them they settled

various trade problems, especially those concerning their relations with local authorities and the Railway Companies, and the apportioning of quotas.

"I wonder if you realize," he added, "that business luncheons are something quite unheard of in this town?"

"Well, they'll be heard of now."

"What's more, it won't serve any purpose. . . ."

"Wait and see!"

Michel shot his last bolt.

"Who's going to pay for the lunch?"

"I am."

It was on the tip of his tongue to remind her that on a quarter of the joint income she could hardly indulge in such costly whims. But he had already gone rather far, and he thought best to leave the room, muttering something under his breath and beckoning to Olsen to follow him.

Mme Donadieu's luncheon-party was more than an innovation; it ran counter to all the local methods of conducting business. And, still more flagrantly, it ran counter to the Donadieu tradition; never had such people as the Camboulives and the Varins set foot in the big house in the Rue Réaumur.

Nothing if not thorough, Mme Donadieu rang up for the car, and she left the office in it well before six o'clock. Five minutes later, the big saloon drew up outside the leading caterer's. Mme Donadieu, who had difficulty in walking, stayed in the car, sending Augustin to summon the manager of the shop. A moment later he was obsequiously standing on the muddy pavement, taking down the order.

"I want fillets of sole for—let's see—twelve people."

She proceeded to work out the menu with him in detail, and on the way home gave Augustin instructions down the speaking-tube.

"Don't forget to go to the market early tomorrow morning, for flowers. And get out the service with our monogram, the one with the ship on it."

On her return she had a long confabulation with the cook.

When Michel came home he found Frédéric Dargens in his

wife's boudoir—more precisely, noticed Frédéric's hat in the hall, and waited for him to leave.

Not that he had anything against Frédéric, or felt any jealousy. But he was naturally unsociable, and he preferred settling down to the evening paper when he got home, rarely troubling even to go and see his small son in the nursery. Ordinarily he would have waited for an hour or more without the least impatience, and perhaps tried the yo-yo that had come with the morning mail, of a new and improved pattern. But, for once, he had something to tell his wife, and he heaved a sigh of relief when he heard the front door open and close.

“Guess what mother has done!”

Eva, who had just drunk two glasses of port and was feeling a little hazy, merely stared at him.

“Would you believe it! At the meeting this afternoon she invited all the men present to come to lunch tomorrow.”

“Here? At our place?”

“No, downstairs. They must be wondering what's come over us. Anyhow, I made it clear to her that *we* shan't foot the bill.”

He could not understand why, on hearing this, Eva showed so little interest.

On the floor above, Olsen, too, was imparting the great news to his wife.

“We'll make ourselves a laughing-stock in the town,” he grumbled. “A business luncheon! To discuss problems of the coal trade! Absurd, I call it.”

“It was mother's idea, wasn't it? Does she expect me to put in an appearance?”

“Well . . . I don't know, really. I suppose I should have asked.”

Marthe did not go down to enquire, but fidgeted about the flat, waiting for her mother to deign to come and say if she was or wasn't to figure at the impending luncheon-party. But the whole evening went by without any visit, or intimation, from the ground floor.

Tired and sulky, Kiki was reading in a corner of his room, his feet on the radiator. Martine was finishing off a table-centre which she had started long before her father's death. Her mother was still conferring with Augustin and the cook.

"Now let's settle about the wines. . . ."

On the second floor, Marthe was studying fashion papers. Dress was one of her chief interests, and she specialized in the dignified and *distingué*. On the floor below, Michel in his shirt-sleeves was trying his new yo-yo, while the Nanny ironed underclothes in the linen-room.

The low clang of her iron could be heard at regular intervals, and Michel's voice as he counted :

"Seven . . . Eight . . . Nine . . . Drat!"

"Drat!" was his pet oath ; too well brought up to indulge in vulgar swear-words, he found this mild imprecation a relief in moments of annoyance.

"Fourteen . . . Fifteen . . . Oh, drat it!"

Eva was playing tangos on the gramophone, while Olsen, the best bridge-player in La Rochelle, was at one of his card-parties, to which he never took his wife.

The hours went to a sleepy monotone, broken only at long intervals by a sudden stridence from the direction of the harbour : the whistle of a trawler putting out through the rain-swept darkness.

An adventure film was showing on the Alhambra screen to a half-full house, and in the house next the Donadieus' Mme Brun was writing a letter to her daughter. At one moment she looked up to say :

"Charlotte ! How about a warm drink ? A rum-punch, for instance."

Mme Brun was a greedy old person, who made a cult of petty self-indulgences. One of her pleasures was writing letters to her daughter, her only child, who had married a member of the nobility and whom she saw at most once a year. For the letter-writing ritual a really elegant bureau was required, notepaper of the best quality and format, a discreetly subdued light, that kindled vagrant gleams on her bejewelled fingers, and, finally, the knowledge that somewhere in the background Charlotte was busy with her needle-work.

"*My dear daughter,*" she had written, "*I know that you will find nothing of great interest in this letter, but your old mother, living in her*

backwater, sometimes feels a need to . . ." And she would ramble on for five or six pages, that she might as well have left unposted, for her daughter certainly wouldn't read them. "*I hear from Charlotte that our neighbour, 'the queen-mother,' is to have a business luncheon at her house tomorrow. It will create quite a stir in our little town. . . .*"

She put down her pen, smiling to herself. They were going to have a bowl of punch all to themselves, she and Charlotte—like two schoolgirls sharing a forbidden feast in their bedroom. Some evenings Mme Brun would call across the room :

"I say, Charlotte! Let's have some pancakes tonight."

She adored pancakes; especially the kind that, after being soused in brandy like a Christmas pudding, are set ablaze; and she insisted on cooking them herself over a spirit-lamp.

"I'm glad about that lunch," she said to Charlotte. "It's an Event."

An "event" which, because of an incident attending it, was to mark a turning-point in several lives.

Was it by an oversight, or deliberate? Certainly Mme Donadieu had no liking for her daughter-in-law Eva; and perhaps she felt some jealousy of Marthe, who went out more and had more friends than she had. She did not tell either young woman that she wasn't wanted at the lunch, but she held her peace—which came to the same thing.

However, after some hesitation, she decided that her two youngest children should be present.

Somewhat to the surprise of the family, she went to office as usual, at eight o'clock; but, while there, she rang up the house twice to make sure that all was well, that Martine's new dress was ready, and that the caviare had been delivered.

Camboulives, a Southerner with a coarse, swarthy face and a booming voice, passed for something of an interloper amongst the magnates of La Rochelle, whose families had been in the shipping business for at least two generations. He was the only one who demeaned himself by going to cafés, playing cards with his skippers

or anyone he could find, and sometimes coming home half-seas-over.

Mortier was a smaller, less impressive version of the late Oscar Donadieu; but with this difference, that he had remained a protestant, and indeed had become still more bigoted with advancing age.

This business lunch was so remote from their experience that, feeling slightly nervous, they arranged to enter the house together.

"I'm afraid you'll find this place a bit depressing, but, so soon after a bereavement . . ." Actually Mme Donadieu looked anything but gloomy; hadn't it been her life's dream to play the hostess? "This is my youngest daughter. . . . Martine, would you hand round the port?"

Kiki was in the black suit he had worn at the funeral, and it was now too large for him. The guests greeted him politely, as if he were a grown-up, but, after some vain attempts to draw him out, lost heart.

Michel, feeling very ill at ease, tried to behave as if he, too, were a guest; while Olsen embarked on a long conversation with Varin, one of whose boats he had been wanting to buy for some time.

"I suggest, gentlemen, that we don't talk 'shop' till the coffee's served. . . . Monsieur Mortier, this is your seat, on my right."

It was Camboulives who started the trouble; any silence in the least prolonged got on his nerves. A moment came when the only sound in the room was the tinkle of knives and forks, and as Kiki was sitting next to him, he turned to the boy and said the first thing that entered his head.

"You're at school, aren't you?"

"No," Kiki answered with a scowl.

"That's not quite correct," his mother put in. "He should have gone back at the beginning of the term, only he was ill; in fact, he's not quite fit yet."

Camboulives hadn't the sense to let the subject drop.

"Are you in the fifth form?"

An unfortunate enquiry! Though Kiki was in his sixteenth year he had never got beyond the Remove.

"His education is three years behindhand," Mme Donadieu explained. "I'm afraid there's nothing to be done about it, though it's disagreeable for him having boys of twelve as classmates."

Disagreeable for the masters, too, having this gawky youth, whose upper lip already showed a trace of down, amongst the juniors, and unable to keep abreast of them in his work. And, what was more, having to handle him with a certain deference because of the high position of his family. Their secret hope was that he would be removed from the school and given a private tutor.

Warming to her subject, his mother went on impulsively :

"It's not my son's fault that he's backward. He had a serious illness at the most critical age, but I've little doubt he'll catch up with the others before long. Anyhow, he's going back to school next week, and—"

It came as a shock when the boy, usually so shy and taciturn, cut in with an emphatic :

"No!"

"What did you say, Oscar?"

"I said 'No.' I won't go back to school."

It was an absurd situation. Under any other circumstances Mme Donadieu could have coped with it easily enough; reprimanded the boy severely, and perhaps boxed his ears. But, for one thing, Kiki was out of reach. And Camboulives, a blunderer born, instead of changing the subject, made things worse by asking :

"If you don't like being at school, what do you want to do?"

Really it almost looked as if the boy had been waiting for this chance. His sister gave him an imploring look. But Kiki, emboldened by the presence of strangers and the fact that for once he had an audience outside the family circle, declared emphatically :

"I want to go to sea."

"Don't pay any attention to him," said his mother, conjuring up an indulgent smile. "He's been seedy, and doesn't realize what he's saying."

"I want to go to sea," the boy repeated.

"And what do you want to be, sonny?" Camboulives asked with a broad smile. "Captain of a liner?"

"I don't care what. I'll ship as a deck-hand if I can't get anything else."

"Mother!" called Michel across the table, signing to her to order Kiki out of the room.

She nodded. But unfortunately she was at the wrong end of the table. Pheasant had just been served, and all heads were bent over the plates. Mortier turned to the boy and looked at him thoughtfully.

"It's a hard life, a deck-hand's. Do you think your health would stand it?"

"Please don't encourage him, Monsieur Mortier," said Mme Donadieu. "He's talking rubbish—and he knows it."

She gave the boy a severe look. He went very pale and his lips quivered. But he repeated doggedly:

"I shall go to sea."

"Oscar!" she said sharply. "That's enough!" Things had gone so far that she ceased to trouble about the company, or keeping up appearances. The child had to be given a lesson. Even Cambou-lives realized that he had better keep his mouth shut. Raising his voice, Olsen said to the man beside him:

"By the way, as regards that cargo of cods'-roe we were talking about yesterday . . ."

Mme Donadieu noticed that Kiki was getting up.

"Sit down, Kiki."

"I won't."

His one desire was to escape from the dining-room, to sob his heart out in solitude. But then he heard his mother's voice again.

"Sit down, I tell you. And eat your luncheon."

Convinced that such an opportunity of asserting himself would never come again, Kiki let himself go and almost yelled at her:

"I'll run away to sea! I'll run away to sea!"

It was getting on everybody's nerves; on Martine's most of all, for she could see her brother had lost all self-control, and there was no knowing what he mightn't come out with.

"Go to bed at once," said Mme Donadieu.

"All right, I'll go to bed. But I tell you I shall run away—and no one's going to stop me."

He walked to the door, then halted on the threshold and, looking at the people round the table, said to his mother in a quavering voice, but so distinctly that everyone could hear :

“Anyhow, the boats belong to me more than to you.”

A clatter of knives and forks. Then a dead silence.

Augustin saved the situation—by spilling half the contents of the sauce-boat he was carrying on M. Mortier’s shoulder.

“Really, Augustin!” Mme Donadieu exclaimed. “What’s come over you? Have you forgotten how to wait at table?”

No more words passed between Philippe and his father on the subject of Martine. But the young man continued coming home at one in the morning, which showed that he still went every night to see if the window were open at last.

He had grown thinner, and sometimes smelt of drink on his return. The staff at the garage just outside La Rochelle, where he was employed as sub-manager, were puzzled by the change that had come over him.

“He’s like a bear with a sore head,” the owner of the garage lamented, and indeed he was relieved by Philippe’s frequent absences. His sour looks, caustic remarks, and especially his shrill, cackling laugh, got on everybody’s nerves.

Hour after hour, in the deluges of October, in the keen November winds, under the grey autumnal skies of the Atlantic seaboard, he would keep hopeless watch in the vicinity of the Rue Réaumur. He even gave Charlotte a note for Martine, imploring her to transmit it, and Charlotte consented. But nothing came of it.

“It’s not my fault,” Charlotte explained. “She hardly ever goes out, and when she does, her brother’s always with her.”

Philippe had encountered them twice. Martine looked hastily away, but Kiki gave him a long, defiant stare. Nevertheless he persisted in his nocturnal visits to the Donadieus’ garden—only to endure, on the return journey, that unescapable half-hour of hateful dalliance with Charlotte in the leafless arbour.

“I know you love her,” Charlotte would whimper in his arms. “If you got what you wanted, you’d drop me like a hot brick!”

"Don't be so absurd!" he protested feebly. "You know I'm awfully fond of you too, Charlotte."

"Oh, stop lying! I know you don't mean it."

For, each time he came back from the other garden, he was unable to conceal his rage and despair. And on one occasion, when Charlotte gave way to a fit of weeping, he rounded on her furiously.

"Can't you understand anything, you damned fool? Don't you realize my whole career's at stake?"

"That's not true."

"Those high-and-mighty Donadieus have humiliated us quite long enough—my father and me—and it's high time we paid them back in their own coin. Do you know the terms of the old brute's Will? No, of course you don't, you never know anything!"

"Madame told me something about it."

"Well, one fine day I shall own that house—just you wait and see! And one fine day I'll bundle some folk out of it—by the window!"

That night he had been drinking heavily, and was indeed so drunk that Charlotte was alarmed. He had raised his voice, and Mme Brun, who, like most old women, was a light sleeper, might easily have been wakened.

An evening came when she had news for him.

"They're going away."

"All of them?"

"That I don't know. But they've been packing all day."

It was a consequence of Kiki's outrageous conduct at the memorable luncheon-party. Surprisingly enough, Mme Donadieu did not give him a dressing-down, or even remonstrate. Nor did she mention the subject to any of the others. But for two days she behaved as if Kiki had ceased to exist, for her.

They had their meals together, or, rather, the boy sat at the same table, but usually he pushed his plate away after the first mouthful—and no one said a word. On the third evening, however, Mme Donadieu, after gazing for some moments at Martine, remarked:

"You're looking out of sorts."

That was so. At no time was Martine's health of the best, but

latterly she had been looking really ill, her face was white and pinched.

Mme Donadieu alone ate heartily all that was set before her; she rose early and left the house in a whirlwind of orders and injunctions to the servants, and, apart from the state of her legs and the necessity of using a stick, appeared almost to have regained her youthful vigour.

“I expect a spell of country air would do you good,” she added.

This was all she said that evening. Next day, however, at lunch she informed Martine that she had rung up Baptiste and told him to start the central heating at their country house.

“It should be ready by tomorrow.”

Neither Martine nor her brother knew what was in store. Nearly every Sunday Michel went to their house at Esnandes—the “Château d’Esnandes” as it was called locally—for a day’s rough shooting, but though he had heard his mother’s telephone-call, he was as much in the dark as they.

Towards the end of the meal Mme Donadieu came out with it.

“Augustin will drive you there tomorrow. Both of you need a change.”

After drinking her coffee she went back to her office, where she had an appointment with a representative of the Merchant Service Board, for whose benefit she had ordered in a bottle of whisky. This, too, was unprecedented in the annals of the office on the Quai Vallin, indeed of all the shipping offices of La Rochelle.

The car made an early start, at a quarter to eight, enabling Mme Donadieu to see it off. The sky was overcast, but the rain held off. In the distance could be heard the boom of Atlantic breakers.

No addict of early rising, Eva stayed in bed, and Marthe merely glanced out of her window without opening it, it being the time when she supervised her small boy’s bath.

“We’ll look you up tomorrow; Michel will come too, I hope. . . . You must be particularly careful not to catch cold, both of you.”

Kiki was wearing black knickerbockers; having no black stockings, he had compromised with grey ones.

“Look after your brother well, Martine.”

Philippe was at the corner of the street at the wheel of a new car that he was running in, under instructions from his employer.

From her dressing-room, in which she spent two good hours each morning, titivating, Mme Brun watched the proceedings.

"They don't look too cheerful, any of them," she remarked.

"Why should they be cheerful?" Charlotte sneered. "They don't deserve to be."

Charlotte professed advanced, almost anarchistic ideas—to Mme Brun's amusement. For, with all her ideologies, she submitted to being at the old lady's beck and call from morn till night. Her revolt was of the purely verbal order.

After her husband had been relegated to an asylum—they had kept him out of it as long as possible, until the doctors had put their foot down—Mme Brun had tried to build up a social circle amongst women of her own age. It had proved a failure.

"They're so stupid," she had confided to Charlotte. "Empty-headed old gossip-merchants without an idea among them."

The truth was that Mme Brun, who was one of the de Marsans, one of the oldest and most respected families in the region (an ancestor of hers had been High Constable of France), couldn't bear being contradicted. Or, rather, she could bear it only from Charlotte, who was the spirit of contradiction incarnate, and took full advantage of this privilege.

"If there was another French Revolution," Charlotte would begin, staring angrily at the next house.

"Yes?"

"I'd lead the way into that house. Those Donadieus are simply asking for it."

Inwardly Mme Brun may have approved of these sentiments. She, too, had married a local magnate, of the Donadieu stamp, one of the leading distillers in the district, and he had compelled her for twenty years to lead a life resembling Mme Donadieu's, seemly and sedate.

Then he had gone mad—mad in the most ridiculous way, for he believed himself to be a sheep-dog!—and left her a handsome fortune.

"Look!" Charlotte exclaimed. "Really, one can't help feeling

sorry for that poor kid. Your pious friends are always collecting money to send slum children to the seaside. Well, that boy lives at the seaside all the year round, but I wouldn't mind betting he's never allowed to go even for a paddle in the sea. Their cook told me he was always begging to be given a bicycle. Can you imagine what they told him? That children of his class didn't ride bicycles, they left that to the lower orders! And I'm pretty sure they hardly ever let the poor boy have a sweet to eat. They probably think it vulgar, eating sweets!"

As for the two women, they were always eating, not so many sweets, perhaps, but cakes innumerable and puddings steeped in rum, kirsch, or some other liqueur, which made them slightly tipsy, and put even Charlotte in a good humour.

"Suppose we make some pancakes, Charlotte, with Grand Marnier on them for a change?"

The two cars were speeding, one behind the other, across the wide plain north of La Rochelle, passing through a series of villages whose low, white-walled houses mirrored the pale translucence of the sky.

"That was very silly what you did, Kiki."

The windows of the car closed badly, and Martine had wrapped a rug round her knees and her brother's. Usually they had to sit on the tip-up seats, the places at the back being reserved for the grown-ups. For once they were travelling in state.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you went the wrong way about it altogether."

"But I do really want to go to sea. . . ."

"Yes, but you shouldn't have said so. Not like that, anyhow."

He was still too young to appreciate feminine diplomacy, and rounded on his sister.

"Look here! I've had enough of being ordered about by you. I don't want any more of your advice."

"But . . ."

"Oh, shut up!"

The fens stretched for some miles on either side of the road, and the sea was out of sight, but there was a strong tang of brine

in the west wind driving across the plain. After a longish silence Kiki asked his sister a question that took her breath away.

"I say, Martine! What did he do when he was in your bedroom?"

"Who?" she asked nervously, to gain time.

"Oh, you know who, all right. What did he do?"

She gazed at him perplexedly. Were his masters right when they declared that he had the mind of a child of eleven or twelve in the body of an overgrown lad of fifteen?

"Why don't you answer?"

At last, looking out of the window, she said slowly:

"He's my *fiancé*. . . . But of course you can't understand."

"Why did he kill papa?"

"He didn't kill papa. I swear to you he didn't. And I can't think who can have put such a ridiculous idea into your head."

Esnandes was in sight, and the square tower of the Château, surrounded by a belt of trees, showed dark upon the grey horizon.

Immediately in front of Martine was Augustin's broad back. And in her ear a shrill young voice, persistent as a mosquito:

"How can you swear it, when you don't really *know*?"

"And you, Kiki"—in her exasperation she almost shouted at him—"do you really know?"

V

MARTINE ran out by a side door while her brother was in his room, unpacking. She was wearing an oilskin, Wellingtons, an old felt hat. For she had noticed that the car which had been following all the way from La Rochelle was a new one, of the make for which Philippe's garage had the agency. And though she hadn't dared to look back long enough to make sure, she suspected he was driving it.

Her hands thrust deep in her pockets, some strands of wet hair straggling on her forehead, she tramped across the carpet of dead, rotting leaves, trying not to break into a run, and glancing nervously round, ready to take cover if anyone appeared.

The Donadieus' country residence was styled "the Château" because of its antiquity and size. But really it was no more than what a former less pretentious generation would have called a manor-house or grange. The surrounding country, as far as eye could reach, was flat, studded with clumps of trees and church-spires. Round the greystone building and the squat, slate-roofed tower ran a double file of chestnut-trees ; in front of the main entrance was a small park, and at the end of this, enclosed by crumbling walls, a wood, some five acres in extent, with oaks and lime-trees, masses of ivy, a tangle of weeds and creepers, infested with snakes and huge black spiders.

There was a walled-in yard behind the Château, and beyond it lay the farm ; a real farm, with cows, hens, ducks and guinea-fowl, a pig or two, manure-heaps, and farm-carts now lying idle, shafts tilted skywards.

Martine had a glimpse of the farm-hand employed by the Mac-lous, who were the caretakers of the Château. She hurried past him, looking away, so as to avoid being accosted and delayed.

When at last she stepped into a lane leading out into the main road, she gave a timid glance over her shoulder, like a child playing truant. When she was passing a cottage someone shouted a greeting, which she hardly heard. On reaching the junction with the main road she gave a little cry of dismay. She had expected to find a car waiting there ; none was to be seen.

After a moment's hesitation she started off in the direction of the village. Women gossiping on their doorsteps greeted her respectfully ; some remarked how pale she looked, others that she was "quite a grown-up young lady now." And Martine struggled on against the sea-wind, her face set and tense.

There was a car parked on the right of the road, but on coming up with it she saw that it was full of small valises—obviously a commercial traveller's.

She walked past a house with a pine-branch fixed above the door ; the first tavern on her way. Her nerve was beginning to go and she had thoughts of turning back, when at last it came in sight. Outside the only restaurant in the village a car was drawn up, the new car that had followed them here from La Rochelle.

Without a moment's hesitation she entered the dark bar-parlour, in which some farm-hands were playing pool, and went straight to the counter, trying to appear at ease.

"A hot grog, please."

"Fernand!" called the woman behind the bar. "Hurry up and get some boiling water. Mademoiselle Martine wants a grog."

Philippe was standing by the window, and he looked as pale, as tense, as Martine herself. Meanwhile she had to listen to the chatter of the innkeeper's wife.

"Will you be staying long, Mademoiselle? It was such a shock for all of us, hearing about your poor father. . . ."

After hunting round for a tumbler less thick than the others, she polished it carefully with a clean dishcloth. Meanwhile Martine, unmindful of these attentions, deliberately let fall her handkerchief and a folded slip of paper.

But for some reason Philippe failed to notice it, perhaps because he was too deep in thought; nor did he come towards her, as she'd expected. Finally she had to pick up the handkerchief and slip of paper herself. After drinking the grog, she fumbled in her pockets.

"So sorry. I haven't brought any money. I'll pay you another day."

"That's quite all right, Mademoiselle. Any time you're passing. . . ."

There were tears of vexation in her eyes as she began to walk towards the door. On her way she flicked the note towards Philippe —whether it fell on the table or on the wall-sofa she had no idea—and hurried back through the village, paying no heed to anybody. A housewife standing on a cottage doorstep remarked to her neighbour:

"Why, she's even more stuck-up than her ma!"

On the slip of paper was written: "*Tonight at eight, beside the old iron gate.*" It was at the far end of the coppice, and had refused to close for as long as Martine could remember.

There were no maids at the Château. Old Mme Maclou and her sixteen-year-old daughter, who was lame, did the cooking and

housework, while Baptiste, her husband, looked after the heating plant.

The rooms were vast and, because of the belt of trees surrounding the house, depressingly dark. The bedrooms had been divided by wooden partitions, so as to provide accommodation for the whole family when they came here in the summer. But at this time of year the house was empty, and it had a desolate, abandoned air. In some of the upper rooms the chests-of-drawers and wardrobes had been displaced, revealing patches of mildew and cobwebs on the walls.

Kiki spent the afternoon reading in his bedroom. They dined at six, as they always did in the country. At a quarter to eight Martine began to fidget, and tackled old Mme Maclou, who had just started washing up.

“You can leave it till tomorrow.”

“But, Mademoiselle . . .”

Martine was conscious of handling the situation clumsily, but her nerves were out of hand. Almost angrily she insisted :

“Didn’t you hear what I said, Sophie? Leave the washing-up to tomorrow.”

“Oh, very well then. . . . Good night, Mademoiselle. What time shall I call you in the morning?”

“Don’t bother to call me. Good night.”

Martine knew her brother hadn’t gone to bed; obviously he suspected something. While she was putting on her waterproof in the hall he suddenly appeared. She braced herself to face him.

“You’re going to see him, aren’t you?” the boy asked.

“Listen, Kiki . . .”

“Answer my question. I know he’s hanging round the house.”

“Kiki, do please be sensible. I simply must have a talk with him—and nothing’s going to stop me. . . . Look here! Suppose you came with me—I shouldn’t mind it a bit—and then you could ask him any questions you like.”

“I don’t want to see him.”

“Anyhow, promise you won’t tell on me.”

“I won’t promise anything. So there!”

And he ran up to his bedroom without even saying “good-night”

to his sister. Still, she felt relieved. The boy seemed a shade less hostile.

She walked quickly down the drive, and as the distance between her and the house increased, a cloud of dark imaginings seemed to lift from her mind. All she knew was that she was going to Philippe; he was somewhere over there, in the shadows. A moment came when somehow she was conscious of his presence, close at hand. A dark form moved from behind a tree-trunk, and she tried to whisper "Philippe!"

But she couldn't get a word out. She flung herself into his arms, and then a fit of dizziness came over her. She shut her eyes and in a sort of dream felt his lips straying over her hair, lingering on her eyelids, then at last, hot and feverish, pressed to her unresponsive mouth.

So still was the young body in his arms that Philippe feared for a moment that she had fainted. Because of the waterproof the kiss had a faint tang of rubber, and she seemed cold as ice.

"Martine!" he murmured apprehensively.

He couldn't see her. Her face was a mere white blur in the darkness. Somewhere a dog started barking, but he paid no heed. A branch creaked. Was it only the wind?

How long she stayed thus, motionless, inert, he had no notion. When at last she stirred, she seemed to be wakening from heavy sleep. Her cheeks were paler than ever. Gently she freed herself, so as to be able to speak.

"Come. . . ."

She made a movement in the direction of the house, where one of the upper windows was lighted up.

"But—what about your brother?" he asked doubtfully.

"That's all right. Come!"

She tried to smile encouragement, but her smile was like that of someone who is utterly worn out after a night journey or a long illness. Yet her voice was surprisingly steady when, on the way to the house, she suddenly asked him:

"Did you leave the car in the village?"

She led him up the steps, opened the door with her latch-key, and switched on the lights in the drawing-room.

"Come in here, Philippe."

It was he who now was feeling nervous; the matter-of-fact way in which she was handling the situation took him aback. He had never thought her capable of showing so much self-possession, and she seemed to have forgotten all about her young brother, who was still awake in the upstairs room, and the Maclous, who must have seen, through the curtains, the drawing-room lights go on.

"Now, let's have a look at you," she said in a low tone. "Yes. You, too, are thinner. . . . Do sit down."

They were so used to meeting clandestinely in a sleep-bound house that instinctively they moved on tiptoe, talked in whispers.

"I couldn't have stood another day of it!" Martine confessed, sinking wearily into an armchair.

Now and again Kiki's footsteps sounded immediately overhead, and each time he heard them Philippe couldn't help giving a start, though Martine kept quite calm. He had drawn his chair beside hers, and was trying to put his arm round her and draw her on to his knee. But when he unbuttoned her waterproof, so as to feel the soft warmth of her body against his, she gently thrust him away.

"No, not yet. Sit quite still, please. I want to see your face."

And her steady gaze was disconcerting; that deeply pondering look in her eyes was new to Philippe. She seemed to be thinking hard, trying to form an opinion about something, perhaps about himself, and she repeated absently:

"Yes, you've grown thinner."

"That's not surprising," he retorted. "For the last month and more I've been eating my heart out, looking for you everywhere. I came to your window every night, and—"

"I knew that."

He had a qualm of fear. She seemed so remote, so indifferent. Those calm, appraising eyes, her silences, the brief remarks that she let fall—what was he to make of them?

"Then why didn't you open your window?"

"I'd made up my mind never to see you again. There were moments when I almost hated you. . . . But I've been thinking a lot. Tonight we must settle things between us. And I want you,

first of all, to tell me quite frankly what you had in mind when you . . . you became my lover."

It had begun quite recently, but he felt as if ages had elapsed since that first hour of intimacy. Until then he had known her vaguely, as he knew dozens of other girls of her sort, daughters of his father's friends, and he had never taken any special notice of Martine. What had prompted him suddenly to embark on a passionate love-affair with her?

As a matter of fact, he'd never had much use for girls of that particular set; their manners, their way of talking, their ideas of amusement—everything about them jarred. In their company he always felt like a wild animal penned in with a tame, domesticated herd, and he made no effort to conceal his sense of superiority. Then, in the spring, a group of young people at La Rochelle had formed a committee for organizing a Red Cross fête, and Philippe had deigned to take part in it.

Martine was far from being the prettiest of the group; pale-cheeked, shy, with little to say for herself, she seemed even younger than her years, and he had hardly given her a glance.

As a matter of fact, it was she who had started it. One incident stood out in his memory. On the night of the final committee meeting, which took place at the Town Hall, he had been fondling Mlle Varin, a plump, flirtatious young woman, in a dimly lit staircase. Martine had happened to pass, and saw the girl nestling in his arms. Philippe had attached no importance to this, but next day, when he took Martine's arm in a friendly way, to give her some instructions before she set out with the others to sell flowers in the streets, she had rounded on him angrily.

"Don't touch me! You're disgusting!"

Her behaviour was so unexpected that it had stuck in his mind all day; he had arranged his movements so as to meet her frequently in the course of the fête, and that night, at the fancy-dress ball concluding it, he had discovered the truth; Martine was in love.

The ball, too, took place at the Town Hall, where Philippe knew every nook and corner. Between two dances he went up to Martine.

"Come with me for a moment. I've something important to tell you."

She was looking very schoolgirlish in a pale-blue dress of some flimsy, gossamer-like material. She hesitated; but he looked her in the eyes and laid his hand masterfully on her shoulder.

"Where are we going?"

They crossed a brightly lit landing. Philippe opened a door, then closed it behind them. The room was in darkness and smelt of ink and blotting-paper. Before Martine had time to realize where she was, he had flung his arms round her; his lips had found her mouth and stayed there so long that she was breathless when at last he released her.

"So that's that!" he said coolly. "Now you can call for help, or do anything you like. . . . I love you, Martine."

She ran out of the room without a word, and left the ball some time before it ended. A week elapsed before he saw her again, though he looked out for her in the town.

Then one night Martine woke with a start, and saw the shutter of her bedroom window opening. She was on the point of screaming when a voice whispered her name, and she saw a dark form astride the window-ledge, then moving towards her bed.

He had drawn his chair closer and laid his hand on hers. He wanted to touch her, to feel her nearness. Martine, however, remained quite calm, waiting for him to speak.

But Philippe found himself tongue-tied. They were so much used to talking in undertones in a dark little room that this spacious, well-lit drawing-room gave him a feeling of constraint. When at last he spoke, the words came awkwardly.

"I was so tired of living amongst people whom I loathe and despise, and I felt I'd found somebody at last who was different. . . ."

She shook her head. She guessed that Philippe wasn't sincere; even his tone had lacked conviction.

The principal reason why he had become her lover was that it flattered his vanity to find a young girl of Martine's social standing giving herself to him so readily—especially a girl belonging to the arrogant Donadieu clan, who on the rare occasions when they

invited him to their stronghold in the Rue Réaumur always made him feel that they were doing him a favour. But what of the future? He had no idea what he wanted, or how to handle the present situation.

"You can't understand, Martine—and it's difficult to explain." He was conscious that his voice was strained, unnatural; all this light made him ill at ease. To cover up his confusion, he bent over the girl and tried to kiss her.

"No. Not now. I want to understand, because we've got to come to a decision. I can't bear it any longer. I feel as if I was suffocating. . . ."

"You see!"

"What do you mean?"

He jumped at the opening; at last he could let himself go, on a theme after his own heart.

"I mean that you've summed it up in a word; you're suffocating. Suffocating because you're cooped up amongst people who don't know the first thing about life, real life; who creep about between four walls without even noticing there are windows. And, if a ray of light happens to strike in, they promptly draw the curtains, for fear they might be tempted to break free. . . . Please listen to what I'm saying, Martine. Words are always futile—but I know you attach importance to them."

"If there's one thing I abominate in the world today, it's a certain way of living, certain houses, and the people who entrench themselves in them and fancy they're superior, and secure. Don't run away with the idea that I'm jealous of their wealth. It has nothing to do with that, I assure you."

"I detest the Donadieus and all they stand for, just as I detest the Mortiers and the Varins, and that absurd Club where a dozen pretentious old fogies doze in big armchairs, thinking they're the lords of creation—pending the day when they're moved into the family vault, which will be no great change in their condition."

"I hate your sister and her husband. I hate that precious brother of yours, Michel. I hate them because they're wasting splendid possibilities, and just to watch them is enough to make one despair of mankind."

"You were the exception. You were determined to make something of yourself. I could see it in your eyes—rebellious eyes . . .!"

For the second time she shook her head. Again, in this tirade, she had been conscious of a jarring note. But Philippe took no notice.

"If you fell in love with me, it was because you guessed that I was an animal of a different breed. You knew that with me there'd be no more walls, no more shuttered windows. I never spoke of marrying you, because nothing would induce me to enter that prison of a house you live in, where I'd run the risk of growing like the other inmates. Just now I've no money. But I can make any amount I like, if I set my mind to it. Yes, I'm certain—I've always felt it in my bones—that I can shape my life whatever way I want, and nothing will stop me."

"So, if you have confidence in me, all I have to say is, 'Let's go away together. Wherever you like. Whenever you like.'"

She wished he could have said it more simply, without all this rhetoric. And from the way she looked at him, he guessed that she was wondering again: "Is he sincere? Or is he play-acting?"

When they were together in the bedroom there had been no time for such speculations. Only in the mornings a dark cloud of doubt would settle on her mind. Mornings of bitterness, almost of aversion from him. Yet, when night came, forgetting all her resolutions, she left her bedroom window open, once more.

Physical desire had nothing to do with it—her senses were as yet unawakened; what she wanted was something very different, but she couldn't have put it into words.

And now she was looking at him almost as she might have looked at him had they met the morning after one of his nocturnal visits.

"Why don't you want to marry me?" she said slowly. "What's the real reason?"

"Because everyone would say I'd married you for your money. Because you're a Donadieu, you have a share in the estate, and, if I became a member of the family—well, I'd play old Harry with it!"

He was handsome, to her mind almost as handsome as his father,

with his fervid eyes, finely moulded nostrils, the dark hollows in his temples under the thick brown hair.

"Do you remember the question you asked last time we met?" he said.

She looked away. She had rather not be reminded of that. Was she to blame if the atmosphere prevailing in the house after her father's disappearance had affected her too? And perhaps a sense of guilt on her own part, which had put strange ideas into her head. . . .

"I should have left at once," he went on, "and never seen you again. There are moments when you have a bit of the Donadieu outlook on things—however much you try to rid yourself of it. Do you understand, Martine? When I got home I broke down completely; so much so that my father was quite worried. And I decided to go away."

"Why did you stay?"

Amazing girl! She asked it quite coolly, in an almost casual tone. Once more he was puzzled by the curious faculty she had of combining extreme matter-of-factness with a capacity for rapturous emotion.

The boy was still pacing up and down the room overhead. There was an embarrassing propriety about this interview, the scene of which wasn't Martine's bedroom, but the drawing-room of the Château.

"I didn't go away, because—." He paused. A new idea had just waylaid him, and this, too, involved play-acting, but he had no doubt he could see it through.

"Because . . . ?" Martine prompted.

"No, I'd rather not say."

She fell into the trap, as he'd foreseen. She even sat up in the armchair and said imperiously:

"I insist on your telling me."

"I'm afraid you'll be angry. But—as you insist. . . . Well, it was when I heard about your father's Will; the whole town was talking about it, of course."

"What on earth are you getting at?"

"Do you remember the question you asked me that night? Not

a very kind one: Was I a murderer? Well, I've a perfect right to put forward a theory of my own about your father's death—if only to clear myself. I remembered a certain detail. . . ."

"What detail?"

She bent towards him eagerly, but he seemed reluctant to continue.

"Tell me," she insisted.

"You remember the last time we met before it happened, on a Saturday?"

"Of course I do. . . . Well?"

"In that case, can't you recall something curious we noticed?"

"Something curious? No, I don't remember."

"Well, at a certain moment—surely you haven't forgotten?—we heard a noise. . . ."

She kept quite still, gazing at him with troubled eyes. Yes, she remembered now. When they were in bed they'd heard the sound of a key turning in the front door giving on the Rue Réaumur; then footsteps in the hall. And she'd whispered: "That's queer. I didn't know that anyone was out."

While the footsteps receded up the stairs they had held their breath to listen, trying to ascertain if they stopped on the first or on the second floor; but the noise of a passing train had made this impossible.

"Now do you understand?" Philippe said, lowering his eyes.

"But it . . . it's unbelievable!" Her brother? Her brother-in-law? "Why must you put such horrible ideas into my mind?"

"You insisted, didn't you? I'm sorry, dear, but I've got to defend myself as best I can. For your sake as much as for mine."

Again she exclaimed: "Oh, I can't stick it any longer!" Then glanced up irritably at the ceiling, for Kiki could still be heard prowling about in the room overhead.

"Does he know I'm here?" Philippe asked.

She nodded. She was utterly worn out, her thoughts in chaos. There was a short silence; then Martine touched him lightly on the arm.

"Tell me, what did your father say?"

"About what?"

"I mean when he saw the . . . the state you were in?"

"Oh, of course I didn't let him know the reason."

The look that crossed Martine's face told him that he had blundered. She wasn't in the least ashamed of her conduct. And just now she was so bewildered, so uncertain, that she would have welcomed advice or assistance from anyone whatever. In a far-away voice she asked :

"Well? What are we going to do?" Then, seeming to wake from a dream, she added impulsively : "Anyhow, I'm not going back to that house. I couldn't stand another hour of it. . . . Philippe, we simply *must* do something."

She had kept her head enough to watch his expression, and could see he was doubtful what to say. And for the first time she noticed that his mouth had a curious twist that made his face look almost sinister at certain moments. It was such a moment now. Why? she wondered. Who, or what, had provoked his anger?

He seemed to be studying the floral pattern of the carpet, the moulding of a table-leg. During the silence which followed they could hear a cow lowing in an outhouse.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet, and at last looked her in the eyes.

"Very well! Let's go away together. At once." The fierceness of his tone startled her, and she hesitated before rising from her chair. "I take it you're prepared to stick it out?"

"To stick *what* out?"

"Your name will be mud at La Rochelle, for one thing. Then, for a time anyhow, you may be desperately poor."

He blushed when he heard her say in a low voice :

"Are you afraid of taking me away?"

For it was almost true. Now, at the crucial moment, his courage was faltering.

"Afraid? Yes, for you—not on my own account."

He was conscious of not rising to the occasion as he should have done, but the banality of his surroundings had a deadening effect; the over-lighted room, Mme Donadieu's big tapestry-upholstered armchair, one of her sticks lying in a corner where she had dropped it, the old-fashioned marble clock on the mantelpiece, above which hung an oval mirror scarred with damp-spots.

"Did you leave the car in the village?" She forgot that she had asked that question before and been answered. Suddenly a new thought came to her. "Philippe!"

"Yes, darling?" Another slip! He'd said that "darling" badly.

"I'm going to tell Kiki."

"Tell Kiki? Why on earth do that? He'll only make a scene—and go and fetch the farmer and his wife, likely as not."

"No, he won't. I'm certain Kiki won't let us down. He's . . . like us."

What exactly did she mean by that? Anyhow, he had no time to think it out. She had run to the door and was calling up the stairs.

There was a sudden movement in the room above. Then, after a long pause, the sound of a door opening, and a boy's voice.

"What do you want?"

"Come downstairs."

"Is . . . is anyone with you?"

"Never mind about that. Come downstairs."

One could tell how reluctant he was by his halting footsteps on the stairs. Martine's eyes were roving restlessly from point to point. When her brother appeared in the doorway she took him by the hand.

"Now, Kiki, I want you to be very nice, and try to understand. I can't face the thought of living any longer in that dreadful house, and I'm going away with Philippe. One day it'll all come right, you'll see—and you and Philippe will be great friends."

She was not looking at her brother as she spoke, but at his reflection in the glass, which made his nose seem crookeder than usual. Hastily she turned away.

"Philippe, please explain to him."

"There's no need," the boy said in a stifled voice. His Adam's apple was heaving convulsively. Then he added in a whisper: "And what about me?"

"You'll stay here. Tell Sophie tomorrow morning that I've gone. But there's no need for them to know you saw us. . . ."

He was standing on the threshold, making little signs to his sister

to come nearer. When she had taken some steps towards him, he said in a low tone :

“Are you quite sure ?” Meaning, “Are you sure he didn’t kill papa ?”

Instead of answering she kissed her brother, then dried her eyes, in which tears were welling up.

She felt dazed ; all she knew was that there was no time to lose. Her nerves were at breaking-point.

“Shall I take anything with me, Philippe ?”

“No,” he said, to get it over more quickly. But the small boy reminded her :

“Your medal.”

“Where is it ?”

The “medal” was a small gold disk with the Virgin’s effigy, a gift, as it so happened, from Sophie, who had presented one to each of her employers’ children for their First Communions, and these medals were regarded by the family as mascots.

Already Kiki was running up the stairs, glad, perhaps, to escape from the atmosphere of the drawing-room. Martine turned to Philippe.

“Sure you’re not regretting it ?” There was a faint tremor in her voice.

Instead of answering, he kissed her. Martine had never known how to kiss. She merely parted her lips a little and waited submissively. Just now she felt like bursting into tears, but she kept a hold on herself.

“Here you are.” Kiki had come back with the medal. She hugged him, and he whispered in her ear :

“You’ll come back for me, won’t you ?”

A branch creaked outside the window. Philippe took a quick step towards the door.

“Well, we’d better be off.”

“Yes. I’m ready.”

Perhaps she would have secretly been glad if at this moment something had cropped up to prevent her going. She didn’t dare to look at Kiki, especially in the glass, which brought out the queerness of his face.

"Here's your hat," the boy said.

A rush of cold, moist air enveloped them when they stepped forth into the portico. The wind was rising, clouds scudding across a moon that was near the full.

Hand-in-hand, they hurried to the old iron gate, the farm-dog, who knew Martine, trotting behind them. No light now showed in the Château.

"The car?" Martine panted.

"Over there. At the corner."

"Let's hope . . ."

They did not hear a forlorn cry across the darkness:

"Martine! Martine!"

But Mme Maclou heard it. She sat up, tossed aside the big eiderdown, and said to her husband:

"That poor child's walking in his sleep again. I wonder if I shouldn't go and see. . . ."

But he went on snoring, and after a few minutes she, too, was asleep.

The damp had got into the engine, and Philippe had to press the starter several times. At last the two headlights sprang to life, flooding the hedgerows of the lane with greenish light. At the first bump Martine gave a slight start, but her voice was almost calm when she asked the young man beside her:

"Where are we going?"

VI

BEFORE opening her eyes she had been dimly conscious for some minutes that someone quite near was vainly trying to start a car. Also that the sun was shining, and (though she'd no idea how she knew this) that she was in the country.

Then, abruptly, she opened her eyes and gazed at the bed beside hers. It was empty; Philippe had evidently gone out without waking her. Raising her arms to her breast, she realized that she was naked, and quickly, under cover of the sheets, reached out for her underclothes, which were lying on a tattered mat beside the bed.

She could still hear someone cranking up a car outside, and it was easy to picture the sort of car it was ; one of those antiquated, high-built vehicles that quiver like a startled horse the first time the engine fires.

A gentle ticking on the marble-topped bedside table caught her ear. It was Philippe's watch, and it said ten to ten. Why, as she bent forward to see the time, did she suddenly feel sure the day was Sunday, and catch herself thinking of the service just beginning at the Donadieus' parish church ?

She was exhausted, in mind and body. It was as if she had been given a severe beating that had left her aching in every limb. Mentally, her fatigue was different ; it took the form of a vast indifference, a total lack of emotion, even of interest in the days ahead. Strangely enough, however, she felt exceptionally lucid, and she fell to examining the room in which she was, sitting up in the bed with her chemise on—for, even when alone, she could never bear to feel her body naked.

What a funny room ! she thought. Utterly unlike any she'd ever seen before. The furniture was of a shoddy, mass-produced type, and, though most of it seemed relatively new, was beginning to show signs of decrepitude. The wardrobe, for instance, had lost a leg and was propped against the edge of the mantelpiece. In its mirror-panelled door she caught a glimpse of her reflected self, and hastily looked away. What surprised her most was the incongruity between the furniture and the room containing it, a large, finely proportioned room with two tall windows and an elaborately moulded ceiling. Obviously in its palmy days this place had been a real château, much more imposing than the Donadieus' so-called château at Esnandes. And, glancing out of the window, she saw the sunlight playing on a spacious park. Someone was still trying to start up a reluctant engine, and there was evidently a dog somewhere about ; she could hear it scraping at the gravel.

Her eyes lingered, for some reason, on an enormous sofa upholstered in green velvet with a tall cheval-glass of the Empire type beside it ; then on a plump white statuette, a bargain-basement Venus, standing on the mantelpiece. The walls, she now noticed,

were hung with studies of the nude, and more or less suggestive prints. Then something else caught her attention. Sniffing the air, she detected a curious, rather unpleasant smell, which somehow seemed to link up with the pictures on the walls. It came, as far as she could judge, from the next room, in which she could hear people talking, and she now observed for the first time that there was a communicating door between the two rooms.

“Where are we going, Philippe?”

When she asked that question in the car, the night before, she had already ceased to trouble greatly for the future; come what might, she was prepared to face it out. If she felt a vague unrest, it was because of the darkness, the racing clouds, the sudden gusts driving across the fens that rattled the windows of the car and made it sway.

Philippe had begun by going to La Rochelle, where he parked the car outside his father’s picture-house.

“You may have to wait a bit,” he warned her.

And she had waited as placidly as if everything that happened that night were not charged with momentous consequences for her whole future life; as she would have waited had her companion got out for some trivial purpose—to buy a cake, for instance. The truth was that she was too tired to think; she had reached a stage of exhaustion where nothing seemed to matter. And when, a few minutes later, Philippe came back, she didn’t ask him what he had been doing, or why he looked so put out.

Actually, he had run up to his father’s office. But Frédéric was out, and Philippe had ransacked his drawers for money without success.

For the last few days Frédéric Dargens had been cultivating a new mistress, a slim young dancer who had been doing a turn between the films during the previous week, and whom he had kept on as much out of charity as because she had a quaintly attractive little face. Had Philippe gone round by the water-front, he would have seen the lights still on at the *Café de Paris*, where the chairs were piled on the tables for the nightly cleaning-up, and, looking in, might have noticed his father sitting at a table near the bar, waiting for the girl to finish her sandwich.

When he started the car again, Philippe was looking gloomier than ever. He had less than a hundred francs with him. The station was closed and there was no train till five-seven in the morning. In any case, it would be rash to go by train; Martine might well be recognized, and they would be traced immediately. As for the car, it belonged not to him but to the garage, and they would set the police on his tracks if he made off with it. In fact, the position seemed quite hopeless. . . .

To his surprise, Martine promptly went to sleep, her head resting on his shoulder. Still uncertain what to do, he drove slowly through the town. When he reached the outskirts and came to a road leading east, beside a canal bordered by big trees, he remembered that about a mile and a half farther on there was a small roadhouse kept by an old, white-haired negro, where bedrooms were provided for loving couples.

He stopped the car outside the roadhouse and rang the bell. But either the negro didn't hear, or perhaps he was nervous about opening his door in the middle of the night. After ringing several times in vain, he turned the car and drove back to La Rochelle.

On the return journey he took the road along the water-front; this time, the *Café de Paris* was in darkness. He had an impression that he could think better if he were not driving, and he stopped the car again. The town was plunged in silence but for a faint sound of receding footsteps, some belated nightbird going in the direction of the Town Hall.

Martine gave a little moan—she was in an uncomfortable position—and, as a last resort, he decided to try the Château de Rivedoux, some six miles outside the town. Whether Martine was really sleeping, or if she was conscious of these strange peregrinations, he had no idea.

The entrance-gates stood open. The park was in darkness and there were a number of drives and avenues criss-crossing it, but Philippe found his way easily enough, as he had been here several times before. He drove to the back entrance of the château and sounded some short blasts on his horn. As he stepped out of the car a big yellowish dog ran up; it did not actually snap at him, but the way it sniffed his legs was far from reassuring.

A knock at the door having no effect, he threw a pebble at one of the windows on the first floor, and presently it opened, and a dim form could be seen, leaning out.

“Who’s there?”

“Philippe. Philippe Dargens. Let me in, please.”

No light was switched on, and, when the door opened, the conversation between him and the woman who had come down took place in darkness.

Martine had only a blurred memory of what followed; of being helped out of the car by Philippe, led through a pitch-dark hall that seemed never-ending. Her last memory was of the woman saying in a wheezy asthmatic voice: “You’ll find a towel in the wardrobe, dearie.”

A moment later she relapsed into a dreamless sleep.

It wasn’t one detail only that clashed. Almost everything she set eyes on was so queer that Martine gave up trying to make sense of her surroundings.

This place was obviously a château, and one in the grand style. Stepping out of her room, she entered a long, grey-flagged corridor, with pointed windows overlooking a spacious quadrangle. But the quadrangle wasn’t merely ill-kept—that would not have surprised her; it, too, bore the stamp of incongruity. In a patch of sunlight beside an unmown lawn, the centre of which was occupied by a group of marble nymphs, an aged crone sat huddled up in an armchair. Neither the old woman nor the chair was such as one might expect to see in the courtyard of a château. The chair was of the “Voltaire” type, with a very high back, and it exuded horsehair at every pore. And the old woman, whose lank grey hair hung round her sagging shoulders, was attired in quite the most hideous garment that Martine had ever seen: a flannelette dressing-gown mottled with enormous pink and yellow flowers.

The corridor led into a lofty hall with a remarkably handsome timbered roof. And, when she entered it, Martine was confronted by, of all things, a player-piano, of the kind that functions when a coin is inserted in a slot. At the far end was a doorway—it was by this door, Martine supposed, she had entered on the previous

night—and beside it a small bar with an array of bottles of liqueurs and spirits. Café tables were dotted about the hall. On the floor a two-year-old child was playing with some dirty rags.

“Shall I serve your early breakfast here?”

Looking round, Martine saw a woman, less old than the one in the courtyard but even dirtier, staring curiously at her. This woman, too, was in a dressing-gown; her shoes were down at heel.

“Would you like some *café au lait*?” the woman continued.

“No, thanks. Not just now.”

As Martine stepped out of the doorway, she came on the man who was trying to start a car. It was impossible to tell his age, it might have been anything between thirty and fifty; he had shifty eyes, towy hair, and was wearing carpet-slippers. Holding the starting-handle in his right hand, he was mopping his brows with the other. With a sigh he pointed to the car, the bonnet of which was up.

“Can’t think what’s wrong with her. But Philippe will be along presently.”

“Has he been gone long?”

“He left just after eight. He asked me to tell you not to feel anxious.”

Though the park had been allowed to run wild, its mere size gave it a certain dignity, and the open gates were flanked by huge stone lions. Beyond them stretched a green expanse of meadows, and a mile or two away the spire of a village church showed above a clump of trees.

“Have you had breakfast?” the man asked.

“Not yet.”

“A proper mess, ain’t it? But give me a month or two, and I’ll get it all cleaned up.”

Martine vaguely wondered what he meant. Did he include the two slatternly women, the old one in the flowered wrap and the younger one in the hall, when speaking of “a proper mess”? For her most vivid impression of the queerness of this place had come from them. Even if she’d known the man’s name—Papelet—it would have conveyed nothing to her. She had only the vaguest

notion that in the neighbourhood of the La Rochelle barracks there was a street shunned by all decent folk, where windows were always shuttered, doors left ajar.

Papelet ran two of the largest establishments in this street, though actually it was his mother, the old creature in the flannelette dressing-gown, who owned them.

During the previous summer the Château de Rivedoux had been put on the market, but there were no buyers, nobody being prepared to face the heavy expense of making it habitable. Papelet had bought it, for the same reason as he had bought a broken-down car; nothing pleased him more than buying up things that no one wanted and tinkering with them at his leisure.

He had repainted the hall himself in pale green, and stencilled on the fresco of gaudy red tulips. The player-piano was another bargain, picked up at a public-house, where it had been replaced by a wireless set.

One evening a group of young men and girls had turned up at the château, asked for drinks, and after that for rooms. This had given Papelet the idea of furnishing one or two bedrooms for the use of loving couples from La Rochelle during week-ends. There wasn't much money in it, but, as he pointed out to Mme Papelet, "every little helps."

"Hasn't my wife shown you round the château?" he asked Martine. His wife was the woman who had proposed *café au lait*, and the small boy crawling on the floor was his son.

It was a Sunday, and the streets were empty but for church-goers when Philippe drove into La Rochelle. He stopped at the Alhambra and let himself in with his key. His clumsy movements betrayed the state of his nerves, and he made more noise than usual when crossing the gallery and opening his father's door.

Little he cared for the fact that Frédéric wasn't alone and a woman's hair could be seen on the pillow, her face half hidden by the sheet.

"I want to talk to you," Philippe announced, without looking at his father, who sat up abruptly.

"Oh, it's you. . . ."

Frédéric glanced at his watch, and scrambled out of bed, after a quick look at the girl, who opened a sleepy eye, then closed it, reassured.

“Let’s go to your room.”

At his first glance Frédéric saw that his son’s bed had not been slept in.

“Hurry up ! I want another hour’s sleep—if I can get it. I may as well tell you at once ; if it’s money you’re after . . .”

“It’s more serious than that.”

Frédéric, who had put on his dressing-gown, seated himself on the corner of a table and lit a cigarette.

“I’ve run away with Martine.”

Philippe had anticipated an outburst of indignation, followed by a violent scene. But his father merely murmured, “The devil you have !” and gazed at his son with mild surprise, almost as if he hadn’t thought him capable of such a feat.

“There’s no need to enter into details,” Philippe continued. “That’s how things stand. Martine has left her home, and I’m responsible for her now.”

“I suppose you realize the risks you’re running ?”

“I do. I know she’s a minor.”

“Well ?”

“All I want is the money for our fare to Paris. After that it’s my look-out. I’ll manage somehow.”

Frédéric left the room abruptly, and for a moment Philippe wondered what this meant. A moment later his father came back and tossed his wallet to him.

“Here you are !”

The wallet contained no more than a hundred and fifty francs.

“That all you have ? What about yesterday’s box-office ?”

“A broker’s man comes every evening to collect it.”

“What the hell am I to do ?”

Half asleep at first, Frédéric Dargens was gradually becoming his normal self. Now and again he cast a shrewd glance at his son, who was staring glumly at the floor.

“Couldn’t you raise some money for me before noon ? How about tackling your friends at the Club ?” “

The only answer Philippe got was a shrug of the shoulders, and he began to feel quite desperate.

“Damn it all!” he cried. “What on earth am I to do?”

“How am I to know? . . . But tell me this; are you really in love with her?”

“That’s my business. . . . Look here! The great thing is for me to get away at once. I’ve left her at—”

“Stop! I’d rather not know where she is. And I may as well warn you that, the moment you’ve left, I’ll go straight to the Rue Réaumur and tell my old friend, Mme Donadieu, what’s happened.”

The girl in the bed, who was wide awake by now, opened the communicating door an inch or two, and asked in a rather husky voice:

“I say! What’s up?”

“Nothing, my dear.”

“What’s Philippe been doing this time?”

“Something silly, as usual. No, more than silly; something rather beastly.”

“Father!” cried Philippe, as Frédéric started back towards his room.

“Well?” There was a tremor of anxiety in Frédéric’s voice. He realized that in his present state the young man was capable of anything. “Would you like me to give you my advice?”

“No.”

“Then what were you going to say?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Philippe grabbed his hat from the bed, hurried through his father’s room and ran down the stairs into the auditorium. He left by the stage-door, and a quarter of an hour later was driving the car into the garage where he was employed.

“Has Denis come?” he asked the man at the petrol-pump.

“Yes. I think he’s in the office.”

Philippe found the owner of the garage, who was little older than himself, in breeches and gaiters, just about to leave for a day’s shooting in the fens.

“I’ve got to have a word with you. It’s extremely important. A matter of life and death. . . .”

Denis observed him with surprise, but said nothing.

"I've run away with a girl," Philippe went on. "Martine Donadieu. I need some money immediately. I'll pay it back all right, I promise you."

"What's this yarn you're telling me?"

"It's the truth."

"But, old chap, I haven't any money here. Or precious little, anyhow." While speaking, he had opened the till and taken from it three hundred and fifty francs. "Sorry, but that's all I can lay hands on."

"Listen! I'm taking the car with me. You shall have it back within a week."

Philippe was already at the door. It had gone with such a rush that the garage-owner hardly realized what had happened. He ran to the entrance, shouting:

"Philippe! Stop!"

But Philippe had already let in the gears and was well away.

Michel Donadieu had risen at six, warmed up the coffee left in the coffee-pot from the night before, and waked his brother-in-law, Olsen. Presently, laden with guns and cartridge-pouches, the two men had got into the big blue car and started off while all the others were asleep—as they did almost every Sunday in winter.

At Esnandes they found Old Baptiste waiting at the iron gate, smoking his first pipe of the day, a shot-gun slung across his shoulder, and the dogs capering round him.

"Starting at once, sir?"

"Yes."

Early though it was, gun-shots could be heard already in the distance. The sun was rising, smoke curling up from the Maclous' chimney.

"Has my sister settled in all right?"

"Quite all right, sir. She came here yesterday, with Master Oscar. They're still in bed, I expect. . . . Let's try that stubble, to begin with; we'll certainly put up a hare or two."

They fanned out, while the dogs ran on, noses to the ground.

It was Michel who fired first, bowling over a hare. Baptiste trudged forward through the stubble and, after finishing the animal off and emptying the bladder, put it in his bag.

Other guns and dogs could be seen in the offing, and greetings were exchanged. It had struck nine when Olsen bagged his first hare. The plain stretched out for miles on all sides, dotted with church-spires, and everywhere, in fens and fields, men could be seen with guns on their shoulders, outlined against the growing light.

On several occasions Michel and his party approached the Château. No one was about, and all the blinds were down.

Meanwhile, in the old house in the Rue Réaumur, Mme Brun was dressing for Mass. Charlotte's eyes were red-rimmed, as if she hadn't slept.

Frédéric Dargens was ringing at the door of the next house. When it opened he said to Augustin :

“Tell Madame Donadieu I'd like to see her.”

Without waiting to be shown in he entered the drawing-room, and he heard a voice saying :

“Ask him to wait, Augustin. I'll be there in a minute.”

A good quarter of an hour went by, during which he heard footsteps and children's voices in the rooms overhead, where they were dressing for church. Mme Donadieu failed to see him at first when she came in, and seemed puzzled. Then she discovered him standing in a corner of the room, staring gloomily at the carpet.

“Sorry to have made you wait. I hadn't finished dressing.”

He found he had quite forgotten how he had planned to break it to her. At a venture, he enquired :

“Any news from Esnandes ?”

“News from Esnandes ? What do you mean ? I don't follow.”

“I've something to tell you. Please sit down. And do keep calm ; if you start making a scene, I'll leave at once. . . . My son's a young blackguard. Last night he ran away with your daughter.”

“With Martine ?”

“Yes. They've been having an affair for some time, I believe.

... Well, that was what I had to tell you—and it wasn't a pleasant task, as you may well believe."

Mme Donadieu stared at him incredulously.

"Really, you must be mistaken. Martine would never do a thing like that." Her smile when she uttered Martine's name showed her absolute confidence in her daughter. Then, as if some memory had just crossed her mind, her mood changed abruptly. "Who told you?" she asked nervously. "For heaven's sake, say something. Can't you speak?"

But, without waiting for him to speak, she hurried to the telephone.

"Esnandes, One, please. Yes. One. No, their 'phone's always on, on Sundays. Put me through quickly, please."

She fell to pacing up and down the room, making quick, distracted gestures. Suddenly she rounded on Frédéric.

"Where are they?"

"I don't know. Philippe came to see me this morning, to ask for money."

"Did you give him any?"

"All I had; a hundred and fifty francs."

"But what on earth do they imagine they're going to do? They must be— Hullo. What's that? No answer? Nonsense. Ring again, please. I know there's someone in the house." After a moment she called nervously: "Don't cut me off. Ring again. . . . Who's there? Is that you, Sophie? Don't shout into the receiver. Hold it farther from your mouth." Old Mme Maclou had never known how to speak at the 'phone. "Yes, that's better. Madame Donadieu speaking. Has Martine got up yet? What? You haven't seen Master Oscar either? Listen, Sophie. You've got to find them. At once. Look for them in the grounds. Master Oscar must be somewhere about. And make haste."

She could picture the old woman hurrying down the back hall, where the telephone was, and out into the drive—wondering, no doubt, what it was all about.

"Have you your car with you?" she suddenly asked Frédéric.

"I haven't any car now."

She glanced out of the window towards the garage.

"They've taken ours. And the absurd thing is, it's the Château they've gone to—for a shoot. . . . Look here, will you try to get a car somehow?"

Frédéric noticed that her eyes were dry; really, she had kept her head remarkably well. Without leaving the house he rang up the nearest garage, while Mme Donadieu, glancing towards the ceiling, murmured: "I wonder if I ought to let them know?"

No, she decided; there was no need to tell "them." Martine was still under her control, and so, of course, was Kiki; this was her business, and nobody else's.

Some minutes later a car drew up outside, and Mme Donadieu and Frédéric got into it.

"To Esnandes, please; yes, the Château. As quickly as you can. . . . No, don't drive too fast," she added hastily; she was always nervous in a car.

"It's incredible! How ever did it happen?"

"Oh, the way such things usually do happen, I suppose!"

"But—. Look here! What are we going to do about it?"

"Ask me another!"

"Surely they can't have taken Kiki with them . . . ?"

People were coming in for Mass as they drove out of the town, and they saw others, with guns on their shoulders, trudging across the stubble-fields. When they were nearing the Château, Mme Donadieu noticed three men about to cross the road, and, tapping the driver's shoulder, told him to slow down.

"Michel! Jean!" she shouted. "What are you up to? Don't you know what's happened? Martine's gone away . . . with Philippe. Kiki too."

They could see old Mme Maclou making frantic gestures near the entrance-gates. For a quarter of an hour she had been shouting to the three men, without being able to make herself heard.

Michel clenched his fists and gave Frédéric an ugly look.

"Just let me lay my hands on the young swine. I'll wring his neck!"

"Don't talk such rubbish," sighed his mother. "You know quite well you won't do anything of the sort."

Of them all, it was Mme Donadieu who had kept her head best, especially as far as Martine was concerned. As regards Kiki she showed more alarm, and had herself telephoned to all the police-stations in the vicinity.

"We must give them Martine's description too, and Philippe's," Michel insisted.

"Don't be so absurd!" And it was to Frédéric, whom the others were eyeing mistrustfully, that she went on talking. "The poor child must have been dreadfully upset. He's so highly strung. I expect he's hiding in some corner of the grounds, crying his heart out. . . . He hasn't even put on his good suit."

Mme Maclou had provided coffee for everyone, and Michel, who could never resist the sight of food, wolfed half a dozen sandwiches, a tragic look on his face.

"Shall I telephone to the house?" he asked, when he had finished eating.

"Certainly not. Aren't there enough of us here already?" Mme Donadieu shuddered at the prospect of a general irruption of the family, with her daughter, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren shedding tears or uttering cries of indignation.

"How do you think he managed to see her?" she asked Frédéric in an undertone.

"I dare say he went to her bedroom at night."

"And—just fancy!—none of us heard a sound." One could have sworn there was a note of admiration for Philippe's audacity in her voice. "Well, I suppose the only thing now is for them to get married."

"What!" barked Michel, who had caught her last remark. "Do you mean to say you'd let my sister marry a cad like Philippe?"

She cast her gaze ceilingwards as if to convey to Frédéric that he wasn't to pay attention to Michel's cantankerousness.

Only towards eleven did she begin to show signs of real alarm. The various police-stations had rung up, one after the other, to report their failure to trace Kiki, and it was certain that he was not in hiding in or about the house.

Michel had started eating again and, exasperated, she rounded on him.

"I never saw such a useless lot of men! Take the car and look for him yourselves, instead of hanging about here. Make enquiries at the villages and railway-stations. Do anything you like, but for heaven's sake do *something*." But when she saw Frédéric getting up, she added: "No, Frédéric. I'd rather you stayed."

When the others had gone, she remarked with a faint smile:

"Well, if anyone'd told me when I was a girl of sixteen that this sort of thing was going to happen to me in my old age . . .!"

She left the phrase unfinished. Frédéric said nothing; his thoughts had harked back to his youth and hers, when she was a plump, sprightly girl of sixteen, regarded as slightly "fast" by the matrons of La Rochelle.

The telephone-bell rang. It was Eva calling.

"Are you there, mother? Do you know if Michel will be back for lunch? Someone called up just now to know if Frédéric was here, and rang off immediately."

"Right, Eva. Thanks for letting me know. . . . I don't think Michel will be going back just yet."

Probably it was Philippe who'd rung up. Mme Donadieu was thoroughly exhausted—events had moved too fast—and too limp to be capable of any great emotion.

"Really, it's all so difficult," she sighed. "I hardly dare to think what would have happened if poor Oscar'd been still alive."

Sophie had laid the table as if nothing unusual had occurred, and had roasted three partridges, shot that morning. But no one entered the dining-room.

"What's your idea of Kiki, Frédéric? You can view him with an outsider's eye, if you see what I mean. All the family think he's—well, not quite all there."

"He's a very sensitive kid, I should say. He takes things too hardly. But it's no worse than that."

They couldn't keep their eyes from straying to the telephone. Now and again shots could be heard in the fens, but fewer and fewer, as it was now the lunch-hour.

"He was born so much later than the others, you know." Mme Donadieu's tone was almost apologetic. "Why, Michel might be his father!"

Towards three she gave up the struggle to keep awake, and lay back in the big armchair, closing her eyes; now and again her lips moved in her sleep. . . .

Night was falling when at last the telephone-bell rang. Frédéric knitted his brows when he heard a voice say over the wire: "Luçon police-station speaking."

It was there that Kiki had been discovered, lying on the roadside near the town, in a state of complete exhaustion. On seeing the police-officer he had made a feeble attempt to escape. Finally he had confessed that he was making for the nearest seaport—intending to run away to sea.

Mme Donadieu listened in amazement to Frédéric's report of what he had been told over the 'phone.

"But Luçon's twenty-five miles from here! How on earth did the poor child manage to go all that distance?" And the thought of it made her burst into tears. "We'll start at once. Let's hope we can get a car."

For the big car wasn't back yet; Michel and Olscn were still scouring the countryside.

Fortunately the taxi had stayed; the driver was reading the paper in the Maclous' kitchen.

"Kiki's found!" Mme Donadieu announced triumphantly. "Listen, Sophie. If Monsieur Michel comes, tell him to return to La Rochelle at once. We're going to Luçon."

As she was stepping into the taxi, it suddenly occurred to her that she hadn't once used her stick throughout the day.

VII

It was like a scene from a fairy-tale; simple, yet somehow touched with magic. Philippe was driving back to the Château de Rivedoux, whose turrets could be seen rising above a belt of trees. A

light veil of morning mist hung on the countryside, but the sun was shining through, and drops of dew were sparkling on the grass and hedges.

There was a sharp bend to the left, and a clump of bramble-bushes hid the continuation of the road. The moment he had rounded it, the avenue leading to the château came into view ; the iron gates, flanked by the two stone lions, were standing open. And there, bathed in silvery radiance, was Martine walking towards him ; quite unconcernedly, as if this were her home. She was dressed in black, without a hat, and her hair was rippling in the morning breeze. The big dog, which hadn't known her on the previous day, was nuzzling up to her with clumsy demonstrations of affection.

She put her hand up to shield her eyes, then, when she recognized the driver of the approaching car, gaily waved to Philippe. There was nothing dramatic about it, but the moment was tense with possibilities ; the least gesture, each fugitive impression, might have incalculable consequences.

The window beside the driver's place was down. When Philippe came level with her, Martine stepped on to the running-board, signing to him to drive on.

Leaning inside the car, she asked :

“Have you managed it ?” And when he nodded : “Are we going away ?”

She wasn't in the least afraid. On the contrary, she was taking the adventure light-heartedly. Even on waking in this queer château, so unlike anything she had ever seen before, her first response had been a cheerful giggle. She had already made friends with the big dog, and was calling him by his name, which was Castor, and, on her way past, had given the old witch in the flowered wrap a bold, amused glance.

Another detail caught her eye, and made her feel more vividly than ever that she had been transported into a world of gay romance ; it was a suitcase at the back of the car that hadn't been there on the previous day ; Philippe's suitcase.

“Are we leaving at once ?”

She guessed that this was so when, after stopping the car, he left

the engine running. Then he went up to Papelet, who said something to him that sounded like "Any luck?"

The two men had a whispered conversation; it seemed that Philippe was trying to talk the older man round into doing something. Anyhow, they moved into the hall where the pianola was, and went on confabulating for several minutes.

"Well, we'll be getting on," Philippe announced on his return.

"Really, Mademoiselle, you should have something before you start," said Papelet politely. "May I bring you a glass of port?"

"No, thanks."

The idea of drinking anything in this goblin's castle made her smile. She was struck by Papelet's familiar tone as, waving his hand, he shouted after Philippe:

"*Au revoir*, old boy!"

After leaving the park they had the sun directly in front, and Martine closed her eyes.

"Who are all those funny people in the château?" she asked, leaning towards Philippe.

But all Philippe found to reply was:

"Oh, Papelet's quite a good sort, really. . . . And he's rolling in money, I should say."

She was vaguely annoyed by this answer. Though she knew too little of the world to guess Papelet's occupation, or the use to which the château was being put, she felt instinctively that there was something shady about both.

The mood passed quickly. After all, why should she resent Philippe's having brought her to that place? Really, it was just the sort of thing one would expect of him. Perhaps, indeed, she loved him all the more for this streak of indecorum in his make-up, his deliberate flouting of convention. He always went all out at anything he had in view—as, just now, he was driving straight ahead at the highest speed he could get out of the small touring-car.

"Won't you tell me where we're going?"

He glanced round with the same smile as she had seen on his face when he caught sight of her coming to meet him on the road outside the château. Then, too, he had been struck by her fearlessness. Far from looking scared by the adventure, she had more

colour than usual. And her tone had been quite cheerful when she asked where they were going.

Just the tone she might have used if they were starting out for a joy-ride on a Sunday afternoon! She seemed to understand his smile, for she smiled back.

“We’re going to Paris,” he said.

“I’m thirsty.”

“We’ll stop for a drink when we’re a bit farther from La Rochelle.”

Now, for the first time, she was able to observe him at her leisure, and, half unconsciously, she fell to studying his face seen thus in profile. Aware of this, he held the pose docilely. She began by trying to distinguish the resemblances and differences between Philippe and his father. There were moments when Philippe’s face looked even cleaner-cut than Frédéric’s, perhaps because it was a trifle longer and his nose more aquiline.

On the other hand, his eyebrows were rather bushy and, on a close view, one saw that his forehead tended to recede; whereas Frédéric’s was particularly straight.

“What are you thinking about?” When she gave no answer, he added: “No regrets?”

“What about *you*?”

No, Philippe was reconciled to the change in his life, and getting used to it already.

“My first idea,” he explained, “was to keep off the main road, in case we were being followed. But I’ve thought it over, and I’m pretty sure your family won’t want to make a scandal; they’d rather hush it up.”

Again her thoughts harked back to her family, and their vast, gloomy house in the Rue Réaumur; but only for a moment. She had caught sight of a small roadside inn, with whitewashed walls, a rough wooden bench in front, hens pecking round the doorstep.

“Stop, Philippe.”

Despite what he had just said, he glanced uneasily behind; and this did not escape Martine. There was a homely smell of onions and pine-cones in the little parlour. A red-cheeked

woman stepped out of the kitchen, drying her hands on her apron.

“What’ll you have?” Philippe asked.

“A glass of white wine, please.”

It was an unforgettable moment; a landmark in her life. The inn was a grocery as well, and, pointing to a tin of biscuits, Martine said:

“Buy me some.”

But there were other moments, other details of their journey to Paris, that were destined, like this one, to stamp themselves on her memory—for all their triviality. That steep hill, for instance, soon after Niort, where in the market-place a shooting-range had been set up. Half-way up the hill, Philippe sounded his horn to warn a very small car panting up the gradient in the middle of the road to draw in to the right. Apparently its driver didn’t hear. Philippe kept his horn going full blast for a good half-minute. Through the back window of the car in front Martine had a glimpse of a young man at the wheel, a girl nestling up against him.

The more impatient Philippe grew, the more determined seemed the driver of the other car to bar the road. Then suddenly the girl looked round, said something to the man beside her, and the car swerved hastily to the side.

As they passed, Martine glanced at the couple in the car. The driver, a young farmer with a toothbrush moustache, gave her a sheepish grin, while the girl laughed frankly as she smoothed her ruffled hair.

There was another incident that stuck in her mind; it took place much farther on—after they’d left Poitiers, as far as she could recall. They were driving by a high stone wall that seemed endless. Behind it lay, no doubt, some vast domain, and Martine kept looking out for the entrance-gates, so as to have a glimpse of the house in which the owner of this huge estate resided.

And suddenly Philippe, who had guessed what was in her mind, remarked:

“One day we’ll be rich—richer than the fellow who owns that estate. Anyhow, I dare say the house is just as dingy and depressing as your parents’ place.”

Nevertheless, she kept her eyes fixed on the wall, waiting for the gap. As a matter of fact, when it came, they failed to see the house, which evidently stood far back, hidden by trees.

She wouldn't stop for lunch on the way. She was not hungry in the least, she said, and she was all eagerness to get to Paris. The air grew chilly with the nightfall, and for an hour or more there was the usual exchange of amenities with other motorists, who wouldn't dim their headlights.

"The tank's nearly empty," Philippe remarked when they were nearing Paris.

He stopped outside a modern, showy-looking roadhouse to fill up, and persuaded Martine to enter for a drink. It was utterly unlike the wayside inn where she had had a glass of white wine. The lounge had the air of a stage-setting, with its enormous crescent-shaped bar, luxurious armchairs, tall stools, white-coated barmen, the silvery flash of cocktail-shakers.

"Have we far to go?" Martine was beginning to feel drowsy after her cocktail, and had half a mind to ask for a second.

"We'll be in Paris in an hour."

"Where shall we sleep?"

Philippe's only answer was a laugh, as he helped her into the car.

That look on Philippe's face had stamped itself on her mind so vividly that henceforth it would be hard to picture him with any other. What day was it he'd had that look? she wondered. Yes, the third day, the morning after she'd slept naked for the last time, for want of a nightdress. Still, she was quite prepared to put up with such small inconveniences; the room made up for everything, quite the most attractive room she'd ever known.

It was in a big new block of apartments in Montparnasse, at the end of the Boulevard Raspail, and hundreds of young couples like themselves lived in it, as she had discovered. She had seen and talked to some of them in the lift, on the way to or from her marketing.

The accommodation was on thoroughly modern lines. Once the bed was made and folded back, the room had the appearance of a small, well-appointed sitting-room, and each apartment had a

private balcony, a bathroom, and a tiny, labour-saving kitchen with an electric stove. The walls were distempered in gay colours, the furniture was modernistic, and the lighting indirect.

But the balcony was the great attraction. On the first day Philippe had bought a bath-robe for Martine at one of the neighbouring shops, and, for the present, it served her as a dressing-gown. For the beginning of winter the weather was remarkably mild, there was bright sunshine every morning, tinged with a faint blue haze, and Martine would step out on to the balcony in her bath-robe, wrapping it tightly round her because of the slight chill in the air. From her sixth-floor eyrie she gazed down at the ceaseless tides of traffic in the street below. When she looked round she could see Philippe shaving in the bathroom, the door of which stood ajar.

In the early mornings most of the people living in the southward-facing rooms came on their balconies to sun themselves, and a young man in the adjoining room daily put in a quarter of an hour of physical exercises on his, with an air of grim determination that always made Martine laugh.

That look on Philippe's face—she could recall every incident leading up to it. He had gone out as usual with his car, which he kept at a garage near by. Then Martine had tidied up the room, taking her time over it, and dressed. Just as she was starting out for her marketing she saw a car draw up below, and Philippe stepping out of it. She waited for him on the landing beside the lift.

“Come along.” He touched her arm and led her back to the bedroom. She noticed that he was breathing rather rapidly. After drawing her towards the window, into a patch of sunlight, he took his wallet from his pocket. “This afternoon you'd better buy a nightdress, or pyjamas, and whatever else you need. Oh, and you'd better get a light dress too; there's no point in your wearing mourning here.”

He took some thousand-franc notes from his pocket—she didn't see how many—and handed her one, adding in a casual tone:

“Will this be enough?”

She gazed at him wide-eyed, puzzled, and a shade perturbed.

And it was then she saw that look, that unforgettable look, on his face; a look of arrogance, with, behind it, some less avowable emotion: a desire to wreak vengeance on something, perhaps the world at large.

“Philippe! What have you done?”

He led her to the balcony and pointed down.

“Don’t you see? It’s not the same car. I’ve swopped mine for an older one—she runs quite well—and I made eight thousand francs over the exchange.”

“But—.” After a moment she got it out, and to her surprise found that she was smiling. “But the other car—didn’t belong to you!”

“That’s all right,” he laughed. “I’ll pay Denis ten times its value one day, if I feel like it.”

But she could see he was vexed, and she tried to make amends.

“Oh, of course, if you do that . . .”

With a slight shrug he cut in:

“Just you wait and see. I’ll make all the money we can want, once I get started.”

“I’m sure you will, Philippe.”

“Anyhow, we’ve enough now to keep us going for some weeks, haven’t we?”

“Rather!”

Nothing would be gained by remonstrating. He was built that way, and one had to take him as he was. Most likely he didn’t even realize. . . . When he’d made her stay at that grotesque château, for instance, she hadn’t ventured to protest. It would have served no purpose, anyhow. And perhaps, she thought, it’s precisely this—this blind spot as some would call it—that gives him his driving force.

The Donadieu family doctor, a cautious man, had declined to take the responsibility, and he gave them the address of a colleague, a specialist at Bordeaux.

The first idea had been that Mme Donadieu alone should go with Kiki, but, the night before, Olsen had come down to announce that his wife intended to accompany her.

"She has some shopping to do at Bordeaux," he explained. That was only a pretext. After a long confabulation with her husband, Marthe had gone to the flat below.

"Can I have five minutes' talk with you, Michel?"

"Certainly. What is it?"

Without replying, Marthe glanced meaningfully at Eva and the Nanny. Michel took the hint and walked into his study, followed by his sister.

"Do you propose to let mamma take Kiki to Bordeaux by herself?"

Without thinking, Michel had picked up a yo-yo and was swinging it to and fro.

"Well, what can I do about it?"

His sister made a gesture of annoyance.

"Do put down that wretched toy and listen to what I'm saying. It's important. . . . Do you think we can depend on her telling us the truth, if it's something serious and—and steps have to be taken?"

At first he looked merely puzzled; then an expression of alarm settled on his face.

"I was reading yesterday," his sister continued, "the article in the Medical Encyclopedia about cases of that sort."

"And do you really think . . .?"

"I came to no conclusion. But I do think one of us should be present when the specialist gives his opinion."

"Who do you think should go? Mother's sure to guess. . . ."

"I'll go." She heaved a sigh, as if deplored that she had to shoulder, unaided, all the family responsibilities.

They decided that it was wiser to travel by train than by car. Ever since his abortive escapade Kiki had been so listless and taciturn as to seem really ill, and they had been watching over him with almost excessive solicitude.

"Sure you're not feeling cold, Kiki?" "Aren't you too hot, so near the fire?" "Take a second helping, dear. If you don't eat you'll never get back your strength."

And, though the railway carriage was overheated, they wrapped him in a heavy rug. Marthe, who had brought a book, read all the way.

"We'll be just in time for the doctor," she said at last, as the train slowed down.

"Oh, are you coming with us?" Mme Donadieu sounded surprised. "I thought you had shopping to do."

"I'll do it after."

Her mother made no comment, but she had understood. Since Martine's disappearance she had been conscious of a change in the attitude of the other members of the family; it was as if they held her responsible for what had happened. And Marthe had been the most hostile of all.

When Mme Donadieu suggested that Marthe, whose son was seven, should send him down now and then to keep Kiki company, Marthe had considered, then shaken her head.

"No. I hardly think that would be wise."

"Why not?"

"I'd rather he didn't see too much of Kiki. Please don't press me to explain."

The specialist enquired of the two women whether they wished to be present while he was making his examination, obviously hoping they would answer "No."

But they remained, and for a quarter of an hour watched him tapping and ausculting the boy's chest. Kiki bore it with surprising patience.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No."

"Do you ever feel a pain here?"

"No."

"Take a deep breath, please."

And obediently Kiki took a deep breath.

"Have you a good appetite?"

"Yes."

"Why did you run away that night?"

No answer. Looking round, the doctor saw the eyes of Mme Donadieu and her daughter intent on the boy. With a grunt of annoyance he rose to his feet.

"If I'm to get any good results, I must ask you to leave me with him. I can see he's nervous when you're present."

The two women retired to an adjoining room. No sooner had they left than the doctor changed his manner completely, smiled, and said in a jovial tone :

“Put your shirt on again, old chap.” Then added quickly : “Your sister’s a bit of a Tartar, isn’t she ?”

But Kiki eyed him suspiciously, and kept silent.

“What games do you play when you’re not at your lessons ?”

“I don’t play games.”

“Well, whom do you talk to ?”

“I don’t talk to anyone.”

“You *must* have a dull time ! What do you do, then ?”

“I read books.”

“Know how to swim ?”

“No.”

“What ! You live at the seaside, your father was a shipowner, and you can’t swim ! . . . Perhaps you ride ?”

“No.”

“Haven’t you any horses ?”

“My brother and brother-in-law had some, but they were sold last year. We had to set an example, papa said, when he cut down the staff ten per cent.”

“What put the idea of Sables d’Olonne into your head ? Had you been there before ?”

“No, but I looked up the map and saw it was the nearest seaport —except Rochefort, and people know us there.”

“Ever been to Paris ?”

“No.”

“Well, where have you been ?”

“Only to Berck. I was at a sanatorium there for six months.”

“Which of your sisters do you like best ?”

“Martine.”

“How old is she ?”

“Seventeen.”

“Why didn’t she come with you today ?”

“Because she’s gone away.” Abruptly he added : “Please don’t tell mamma I told you. She went away with Philippe. I’m quite sure now he didn’t kill papa.”

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Never mind. Don't ask me anything else, please. . . . I say, am I really ill? Too ill to go to sea?"

"Well, you're not up to it just now, I'm afraid. It will depend . . ."

"On what?"

"On the sort of life you lead for the next year or so. You must develop your muscles, fill your chest out. And you must learn to breathe properly; that's essential. No, you're not strong enough to be a sailor yet."

The boy was gazing at him fixedly, thinking hard.

"Is that all?" he asked, after a short silence.

"Once you've put on another twelve pounds' weight you'll be fit for anything—but not before."

"Twelve pounds," Kiki repeated thoughtfully.

The specialist had much the same advice to give in the talk that followed, with Mme Donadieu and Marthe.

"I do not altogether agree with my colleague at La Rochelle—that the boy has a predisposition for what we call *fugues*; that's to say, running away from home. I shouldn't be surprised if he never tries to run away again. But I strongly advise you to make his life as cheerful and healthy as possible, to encourage him to play games, and to discourage him from reading."

"Don't you think, doctor," Marthe began, and her tone was vaguely ominous, "don't you think the fact that he was born when mother was over forty and father almost sixty may have some bearing . . .?"

"Not necessarily," said the doctor, after a quick glance at Mme Donadieu.

"I mentioned that because my sister, who is only two years older than Kiki, resembles him in some respects. I'm afraid I mustn't speak more clearly. But I'd be glad to know one thing. Do you consider Kiki a normal child?"

She was taken aback when he enquired blandly:

"Might I ask exactly what you mean by 'normal'?"

"Well, for instance, do you think he's fully responsible for his acts?"

Whereat the doctor, who had been eyeing her shrewdly, retorted :

“Do you know many people who are fully responsible, as you put it, for their acts ?”

Marthe sprang to her feet, looking daggers at him.

“You are deliberately misunderstanding me, doctor. Really, I’m amazed. . . .”

“My dear lady, you’re much mistaken ; I understood you perfectly well. . . . And now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll write out, not so much a prescription, as a few suggestions which I hope you will follow. In my opinion, there’s no reason why the boy shouldn’t go back home, provided”

That evening, when her husband came back from office, Marthe vented her indignation to him.

“Really, that specialist was most disappointing. He didn’t even try to find out if Kiki hasn’t some congenital taint.” And, in a lower voice : “It’s quite possible that father got infected with—with some disease after we were born. Anyhow, in the article I read, they say that most cases of the kind are due to heredity.”

“Cases of what kind ?”

“Of running away from home. ‘Fugue,’ they call it. The doctor wouldn’t even listen when I told him Kiki’d had trouble with his spine.”

“Do you know who he is, this guardian of hers that they’re talking about ?” Charlotte’s voice was so shrill, and she looked so fierce, that Mme Brun burst out laughing.

“You may laugh,” said Charlotte sulkily, “but nothing will convince me that she hasn’t run away with Philippe.”

“Nonsense !”

“I tell you, I’m certain of it. Of course, the family make out she’s staying with her guardian, but that’s just eyewash. What the servants told the milkman was the truth ; she’s eloped with that young man.”

“It’s Philippe Dargens you mean, I suppose ?”

“Who else would it be ?” When in a temper, as now, Charlotte

could look almost murderous. "Where do you think they've gone?"

"What does it matter anyhow: Wherever that poor girl is, she's better off than she was at home."

"Do you really think that?"

"Certainly I do."

Charlotte was set on having the last word, and she had it.

"Well, if that's how you feel, you'd do better not to say it. Because, in that case, there's no reason for poor girls, like me, to keep straight."

And as she usually did on her "bad days" (as Mme Brun called them), when her digestion was out of order, Charlotte flung out of the room, slamming the door, and shut herself up in the linen-room, where she could be heard grumbling to herself.

Hadn't Marthe, too, something of the same feeling towards her mother? She had been a model of propriety in her girlhood; indeed, her father had seen to it that she shouldn't be otherwise. She would never have dreamed of going to a ball without a chaperon, as Martine had been known to do, and the cook had always escorted her to school.

And now she was profoundly shocked at what appeared to be the crumbling of the old régime. Martine had eloped with a young man, and the whole family was dishonoured. Yet Mme Donadieu deliberately, it seemed, refrained from talking about it; not because the subject was too painful, but because the others tended to take it too tragically. One evening, when they had been getting on her nerves, she had even defended Philippe.

"After all, he may be quite a decent young fellow for all we know. His father says he has brains."

Had such a remark been made two months earlier, in Oscar Donadieu's lifetime—or had any member of the family dared to find excuses for a shameless hussy like Martine—the house would surely have rocked to its foundations! Marthe was appalled by the change that had come over her mother, her moral laxity.

This business about Kiki was another case in point. From what she knew of her father—and, as his favourite daughter, almost his

only confidante, she had known him through and through—she felt convinced that he would have taken a most serious view of his son's escapade. Instead of taking the boy to a doctor, he would have packed him off to a reformatory, or some such institution, probably in some foreign country.

And now, hardly was the old man in his grave than everything had changed. Almost it seemed taken for granted that a small boy should be allowed to make a scene at a luncheon-party, then run away from home, while his sister . . .

"I hate to say such a thing," Marthe told her husband, "but I put it all down to mother's influence. A demoralizing influence, I'm afraid. It's as if she'd suddenly gone quite crazy. Do you know, she's actually been talking of spending a month this winter on the Riviera, and taking Kiki with her."

"She can't have meant it!"

"I assure you she spoke quite seriously."

"But where's the money to come from? We shall have at least five more boats laid up before the month is out, and I'm afraid we all shall have to cut down expenses."

"Have you told her that?" (By "you" she meant both Michel and Olsen.)

"Not yet. But we shall."

"Have the staff any suspicions about what's happened? I mean, about Martine?"

"I really couldn't say."

"Well, yesterday, when I was at the hairdresser's, I saw old Mme Brun, and she gave me such a funny smile."

"Mme Brun! *She* has no right to criticize us, anyhow. Why, when her husband went off his head and had to be locked up, she didn't even shed a tear. On the contrary, it was quite a scandal the way she started carrying on; the 'Merry Widow' everyone was calling her, and . . ."

"Listen!"

"What is it?"

"Someone's coming up. Have a look."

He tiptoed out of the room, and leaning over the banisters saw Frédéric on the landing below. He was visiting Eva. They were

going to sip liqueurs and smoke cigarettes in the boudoir with the black velvet curtains.

“He should be more careful.”

“Who?”

“My brother. One day there’ll be trouble, mark my words: Do you know, Eva refuses to wear a crape veil; she says it makes her eyes smart!”

Marthe was tall, statuesque, and her black dress made her look even more queenly. Olsen, several years younger than his wife, and secretly rather in awe of her, had already made three attempts to go on reading his book, but she had frustrated him each time. Now she switched over to a new topic.

“Are the crews still talking of a strike?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. I’ve been told that it’s part of a deliberate plot to make things difficult for us this winter.”

“A plot? Who’s behind it?”

“Camboulives. He’s standing as a candidate at the next elections, so I hear, and he goes about proclaiming that his father was a fisherman and he started life as mate on a trawler. Currying favour with the masses, of course.”

“Why shouldn’t Michel contest the election? He’d have quite a good chance, I should say.”

The lamps were closely shaded, and there was a soft, warm glow in the room. Olsen made another attempt to read, but his wife returned to the attack.

“What does mother say about it?”

“All I know is that she’s asked Camboulives to lunch again.”

“And of course you two take it lying down!” Marthe exclaimed indignantly. “Really, if things go on like this, I shall start attending the office myself, like mother. Something must be done....”

Here, too, as in the rooms below, a portrait of Oscar Donadiéu hung on the wall, but it was only an enlarged photograph.

That night Martine and Philippe went to a cinema. They hardly gave a thought to La Rochelle, or the talk that must be going on about them, in the Olsens’ drawing-room, in the Donadieu

offices, or at Mme Brun's. They had no idea that Michel was threatening to come to Paris to track them down—amongst the city's four million inhabitants!—, Olsen talking of laying a complaint before a magistrate, Marthe bemoaning her mother's supineness, yet all united on one point: the necessity of avoiding any public scandal—which was why the days went by without any move being made.

Watching the animated cartoon, Martine had a little thrill of pleasure, like that she had experienced in the roadside inn where she had drunk that glass of cellar-cool white wine. It had come to her again one morning, on the sunlit balcony outside their bedroom—a fleeting rapture for which she was unable to account, but of which she could never have too much.

Unthinkingly she laid her hand on Philippe's arm and nestled up against him. Then a man immediately in front blew his nose loudly—and the spell was broken.

VIII

“. . . that I am very happy, and I send you my love and best wishes for the coming year.”

December had been a month of gales and deluges of rain, marked by catastrophe when the *Marie-Française*, a three-master that had weathered many a storm off the Newfoundland coast, went down with all hands off the Isle of Oléron.

New Year's Day was no better. Though the rain held off, an icy wind swept the streets, forcing its way into the house, under doors and through the chinks of window-frames.

“I don't know how the rest of you are feeling,” Mme Donadieu grumbled, “but personally I'm frozen.”

So much so that she was wearing a fur coat in the drawing-room. Something was wrong, evidently, with the central heating; Kiki was sitting on his bedroom floor with his back against the tepid radiator, and the others were no better off for warmth. Olsen was particularly unfortunate, for he was suffering from a severe

cold ; his nose was as red as a tomato, and his face swollen out of recognition.

“I’ve always said it’s impossible to warm this house with the central-heating plant we have. It’s much too small for a place like this.” Mme Donadieu had been making this lament every winter for twenty years and more, to no avail.

Something had to be done to celebrate New Year’s Day, but now that Oscar Donadieu was dead, the ritual was changed. Indeed, slowly but surely, the old order was becoming a dead letter ; one almost wondered how the portrait in the drawing-room could keep that look of stolid satisfaction !

On the excuse that it was really too cold to venture forth, and anyhow one isn’t obliged to attend church on New Year’s Day, Mme Donadieu stayed at home, contrary to all precedent.

The servants had gone to Low Mass at seven. Mme Donadieu did not emerge till eight, and she was wearing a weekday dress. As she was walking past the dining-room she heard a slight noise inside, and, looking round, saw Kiki standing in the doorway, with Edmond beside him.

Kiki was in his Sunday suit ; so was Edmond. So ceremonious was their attitude that one almost fancied they were wearing gloves.

Mme Donadieu’s first impulse was to walk away without saying anything. She always felt like this when confronted by the young tutor or by any of his “doings,” as she inwardly described them.

For it was an idea of Michel’s, this importation of a private tutor for Kiki into the household. He had advertised in a scholastic paper, and one day a young man had presented himself, so timid that he could hardly get a word out at first, and so much overawed by his surroundings that he was seen to bow to one of the portraits in the hall. He was studying for a classical degree, and a bed-sitting-room had been fitted up for him on the top floor, where the servants slept.

Obviously this was one of Edmond’s “doings.” He had told Kiki to put on his Sunday best, and now he was nudging him with his elbow.

"Mother, dear, as a new year begins today, I take this opportunity . . ."—Kiki hesitated, and one almost expected the young man to prompt him—" . . . of assuring you that I will do my very best to please you throughout the . . . the coming year, and . . ."

"Splendid!" she cut in hastily, giving him a kiss. "That's very sweet of you, Kiki. And I wish you a very happy New Year, darling, and, above all, better health. Happy New Year, Edmond."

"Permit me, Madame, to offer you my best wishes and my hopes . . ."

Thus the day started. Next it was Augustin's turn; he said his little piece while serving the morning coffee. Then the cook's, who held the door ajar and poked her tousled head in.

"Thank you very much," said Mme Donadieu. "And the same to you."

Meanwhile she could hear people moving in the rooms above, and on the stroke of nine the Olsen family trooped down. All were in their best clothes and wore a ceremonious air. Marthe pushed her seven-year-old son into the forefront and, a paper in his hand, Maurice began reciting his New Year's wishes, sometimes pausing to look up at his mother for approval. The recitation ended with ". . . my dearest grandma, whom I love with all my heart."

"I won't kiss you," Olsen mumbled. "I'd be afraid of passing on my cold."

Then the Olsens left to present their New Year's wishes to Olsen's uncle, who was consul for Norway at La Rochelle.

There remained the first-floor household, Michel and his wife, whose footsteps could still be heard on the floor above. As for the staff—clerks, crews, and workmen—they had been dealt with on the previous evening, when there had been bestowed on each a glass of port—or, rather, a red wine masquerading as port—and a couple of cigars.

The bell rang. Augustin opened the door, and Frédéric entered the room without waiting to be shown in, went up to Mme Donadieu, and lightly kissed her cheeks.

"All the best, my dear," he said with an affectionate smile.

He noticed a tray standing on the table, with port, biscuits, and

cigars ready for the morning's callers. It was a custom of the house, going back as far as he could remember.

"All going smoothly?"

"I'm through with one lot," she smiled. "And now I'm awaiting the second visitation. Kiki handed me out a regular speech."

"And I've something for you, too."

He took from his pocket an envelope from which the stamp had been peeled off, as if it had been through the hands of a collector—a detail which Mme Donadieu noticed at once. From the envelope Frédéric extracted two letters, one of which he handed her.

"Dearest Mother,—I can't let the old year end without writing to tell you that I am very happy, and I send you my love and best wishes for the coming year.—Martine."

That was all. Surprised, and more affected than she cared to show, Mme Donadieu gazed at Frédéric, as if enquiring what this meant; then her eyes fell on the second letter, which was covered with writing in a small, neat hand.

"This is from Philippe," he said. "There's no reason why you shouldn't read it too."

"Dear Father,—First let me say that Martine and I send you our greetings and the usual wishes for the New Year. In my last letter . . ."

Mme Donadieu looked up quickly. Frédéric, who understood the look, hastened to explain.

"He's written to me twice. He hadn't much to say. Only that he was fit, and getting on all right."

He rose, poured himself out a glass of port, and lit a cigarette.

"In my last letter I asked for news from La Rochelle, and especially I asked you to tell me quite frankly what people are saying about us."

She stopped reading. There were footsteps on the stairs. Michel came in, holding his five-year-old son by the hand, while Eva had the baby in her arms—an unusual sight.

Three kisses for each. On the left cheek, then the right; then on the left again. It was a family institution. The little boy, younger than Marthe's, had no set speech to deliver.

"It's dreadfully cold here," Michel observed.

His eyes fell on the decanter at once, and he poured himself out a glass of port. He gave a vague nod to Frédéric, with whom his wife was exchanging greetings, then raised his glass.

"Here's the best!"

Michel was looking worried and out of sorts. His eyes had a curious shiftiness, and there were dark pouches under them.

"The committee meetings are most exhausting," he had thought fit to explain to his wife, who hadn't asked him anything.

He had been asked to preside over a committee for the erection of a statue of Gérard Dampierre, near the Old Town Clock.

With his port he ate several biscuits. The sight of food always roused his appetite.

"Why don't you light the fire?" asked Eva. "We've had one going all the morning."

"You know quite well that this fire never draws. I'd be smoked out."

"Has Marthe been down?"

"Yes. She's gone out with her husband and Maurice."

Mme Donadieu was fretting for them to be off. She had the two letters in her hand and, as ill luck would have it, Eva, who had a knack for indiscretions, noticed them.

"Hullo! Isn't that Martine's writing?"

"It's an old letter I discovered in my desk."

"Oh, is that all? I thought perhaps she'd written. . . ."

"That would be the last straw," mumbled Michel, his mouth full.

"Well, I'm afraid I must be going up again," said Eva. "The baby, you know . . ."

"Yes, yes. I quite understand."

"You'll drop in for a bit before you go, won't you, Frédéric?"

Michel followed her out, announcing that he had an appointment in town. A mingled smell of port, sweet biscuits, and cigars hung in the air; the characteristic smell of New Year's Day in the Donadieus' drawing-room.

"Don't you think Michel has aged a good deal lately?" asked Mme Donadieu when the others had left.

Frédéric looked away, to hide a smile. He knew very well the cause of Michel's "ageing." In fact, he had it in his pocket.

It was a small weekly paper, printed in big type on very stout paper, and oddly named *The Laundry*. The first number had appeared two days previously. Under the title was an inscription in italics : "*For the Weekly Cleansing of our Civic Life.*"

A general election was due to take place in the following spring, and the business of the Dampierre monument was a pretext for a preliminary skirmish. Chosen ostensibly to do honour to an eminent citizen of La Rochelle, the committee was composed of the most reactionary elements, and Michel Donadieu had consented to be its president.

A week after the first committee meeting hostilities had opened ; *The Laundry*, a publication of extreme scurrility, had been deposited in a thousand letter-boxes, and even posted on the walls of public lavatories.

"AN OPEN LETTER TO M. DONADIEU, JR.

"We do not propose, in this our first issue, to liquidate for good and all the honourable gentleman above-named, who has recently announced his wish to represent the citizens of La Rochelle in Parliament. The Augean stables were not cleansed in a day, and M. Donadieu, Jr., need feel no immediate alarm ; we shall proceed by gradual degrees. Week by week we shall throw fresh light on a certain rather sordid mystery, a blemish on our town's good name, of which many of our citizens have an inkling, but few dare to speak openly.

"By way of hors d'œuvre to a repast which, we promise our readers, shall be Gargantuan, we shall lead off with a brief questionnaire.

"Is it a fact that, on December 23, Mlle Odette B., aged 23, a typist employed in the palatial Donadieu building on the Quai Vallin, took the train to Bordeaux in the company of a woman in black, who lives some miles out of the town and whose house is resorted to—clandestinely—by young ladies who have (as the saying goes) got into trouble ?

"Is it a fact that, shortly before these two ladies took the train, Mlle Odette B. had a heart-to-heart talk with her employer, M. Donadieu, in his sanctum, and that at this interview she burst into tears repeatedly, and ended up by fainting ?

"Is it a fact that one of our least estimable townsfolk, who has recently bought an ancient château near La Rochelle—with a view to using it, we presume, as the country branch of his chain of 'houses' in the town

itself—might have much to tell about certain meetings previous to the one described above, and of a much more cheerful order, between our Grand Panjandrum Junior and his typist?

“And that, alas, these meetings had consequences, which involved an appeal to the services of the obliging dame in black?

“And that, her efforts having failed, there was a hurried journey to Bordeaux to consult a specialist, and Donadieu in an incredible burst of generosity handed to the said specialist the (to him) enormous sum of two thousand francs?

“And that since then he has been quaking in his shoes, awaiting a message from the nursing-home, to which he dares not telephone?

“We feel sure the answers to these questions would be highly interesting, but we foresee that none will be forthcoming; in which case we shall publish a further list, on another topic.

“For, after all, Oscar Donadieu has not been buried so long that an exhumation, followed by another post-mortem, is ruled out.”

The article was signed “*Fiat Lux.*”

One morning Olsen, a copy of *The Laundry* in his pocket, entered Michel’s office.

“Is it true, what’s said here?”

There was no need for an answer. Olsen had only to see his partner’s woebegone face to realize that it was true, though Michel tried to prevaricate.

“Well—er—it’s a fact that she’s been ill. But I had nothing to do with it, I assure you. I wasn’t her first, or only one, by any means. She’s . . . that sort of girl.”

“What do you propose to do about it?”

He had no idea, and merely murmured sulkily:

“I wish I knew who the swine is who edits that filthy rag!”

Frédéric could have told him; little went on at La Rochelle that escaped him, and he knew, better than anybody, the personalities of its inhabitants.

And the personality of Dr Lambe, the writer of the article signed “*Fiat Lux.*” was remarkable in its way. During the five years that he had been practising at La Rochelle he had cut an inconspicuous figure. A lean, bilious-looking, middle-aged man, he lived in a small house near the barracks, not far from the street of ill fame whence Papelet derived his wealth. His practice brought him in very little; he hadn’t even a whole-time servant, and opened his

door himself after six o'clock. Most of his patients were farm-hands from the surrounding countryside.

As recently as a fortnight before, he had passed for a nonentity. He belonged to no club, had no truck with the local bigwigs, and was never seen in cafés.

Then, out of the blue, he had launched this rag, *The Laundry*. Had he political ambitions, and did he want to bring himself into the limelight? Or was he merely a blackmailler? Nothing was known of his intentions, and everybody was waiting eagerly for the doctor's next move. Some said that Donadieu would prosecute, and was sure to win his case; others that *The Laundry* would cease appearing; the Donadieus were rich enough to see to that.

Frédéric had a copy of the paper in his pocket, but he naturally refrained from showing it to Mme Donadieu.

“What's he doing?” she asked. Her thoughts were still with Martine and Philippe.

“I haven't an idea. But he says he's getting on all right.”

“If you'll excuse me, I'll go on reading.”

“*In my last letter I asked you to write me Poste Restante, Neuilly. I especially asked you to let me know how things were at your end, but all you thought fit to reply was: 'everything's as usual.'*”

Mme Donadieu looked up, and Frédéric smiled rather sadly.

“*I must say that was rather mean of you, considering I've always treated you as a pal, and I hoped you'd do the same. Also, if I wanted this information, it was more for Martine's sake than my own.*”

“*Do you still see the Donadieus? If so, I wish you would explain to them exactly how I feel about it. I can't forget that I was always treated by them as if I were a pariah; that Oscar Donadieu threatened to throw me out by the window if I came again!*”

“*Well, I didn't go out by the window but by the door, and if Martine went with me, I can assure you it was entirely of her own accord.*”

“*We had been in love for a long time. If her father hadn't taken up such an absurd attitude, I'd have gone about it in the normal way, and asked for his consent to our engagement. And after his death I should certainly have approached Mme Donadieu, had not Martine*”

begged me to take her away at once; she couldn't stand the atmosphere of that house a day longer—and I don't blame her.

“I tell you all this because I could see, when we met for the last time, that you disapproved of my conduct.”

Frédéric kept his eyes on the back of the letter as she read it, and, though he knew it by heart, he was reading it again. From time to time Mme Donadieu shot him a questioning glance. He merely shrugged his shoulders.

“Is it true?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m pretty sure it’s true.”

“Try to put yourself in my place. I’m twenty-five. I’m what they call a ne’er-do-well, because I hadn’t the luck to step into a fortune or a soft berth in an office on the Quai Vallin. That is not your fault, I know; but it’s a fact we have to face.

“In spite of these handicaps, I have managed to keep my end up, and I shall go on doing so; more successfully, perhaps, than others who had an easier start.

“If I had proposed marriage to Martine, they’d only have said I was a fortune-hunter, and of course turned me down. As it is, I can hold my head up, and tell them boldly: ‘We love each other, Martine and I. Nothing will part us. We can stand on our own feet, and we ask no help of anyone.’ And that would be the truth. I am earning enough to provide for us both, in a simple but quite decent way.

“Perhaps you might convey this to Mme Donadieu, who may possibly understand. But it’s no use saying anything to Michel or to Olsen; they would simply foam at the mouth!

“Martine is quite happy. At first I was rather anxious about her health. But she assured me she had always been like that and, at home, no one worried about it. However, I took her to a specialist. He asked questions about her family and gave her an X-ray examination. He was particularly interested to hear about Kiki’s spinal trouble, and he prescribed a change of diet.

“She has now to eat twice as much as she used to, and take long walks, for three hours a day. She sleeps with her window open, and, on the doctor’s advice, we shall go to the seaside in the spring.

“But it will be a very different seaside from the one patronized by

the rich folk of La Rochelle, who are satisfied with glimpses of the tail-end of a port. 'You understand, I hope. . . .

"For the rest—do as you think fit. This letter isn't in any sense a 'feeler.' And I know that, if I proposed going back to La Rochelle, Martine would be up in arms at once.

"But if I write like this, quite straightforwardly (you will learn nothing by trying to 'read between the lines'), it's because I have in mind a possible contingency. You see what I mean? Martine being a minor, her guardian's consent is necessary for our marriage. And it is possible that something may have happened before we get it.

"Once again I assure you that we are perfectly happy; Martine has no idea that I am writing to you at such length. As a matter of fact, it was all I could do to get her to send a few lines to her mother for the New Year; but for me, she'd never have thought of it!

"As for money matters, I'm not doing too badly. I have gone into partnership with a friend, and we have launched a business which may develop one day into something really big. I will only mention that we have just obtained an option on the construction of a new breakwater at a big seaport in North Africa. It is on the cards that I may have to go there within the next few weeks, and we may be absent for some time.

"Please yourself about answering this letter. And form your own opinion. Unhappily I know only too well that there's always a gulf of incomprehension between two generations; with all your broad-mindedness you have never really understood me.

"Affectionately yours,—Philippe."

"What's he getting at?" Mme Donadieu asked.

That, indeed, was the problem; how was this letter to be taken? For all its inconsequences, one guessed there was a definite idea behind it. There was even a postscript, which was not its least revealing element.

"If you show this letter to anyone, please destroy the envelope, because of the postmark. Not that this greatly matters; we are not living anywhere near Neuilly. And I hardly think they will set the police to look for us. Still, with a fellow like Michel, one never knows, and it's best to be on the safe side."

"What's your opinion of your son, Frédéric?"

He rose, smiled, and took a sip of port before answering.

"When I was his age my father predicted that I'd end my days in jail because I'd bought a horse, half cash down and half on tick. Soon after that I signed an I.O.U.—it was quite above-board and I paid up when it fell due—and my father, who had never borrowed money in his life, not even for his biggest ventures, told me I was bringing discredit on his name."

She saw his drift, but would have preferred something more explicit.

"It was Philippe I asked you about."

"You should put that question to someone of his generation."

He refused to sit in judgment on his son. There was much that displeased him about the young man; some things that Philippe did seemed to him outrageous. Yet who could say which of the two generations was in the right?

True, the letter was cold; but there had never been much display of sentiment between father and son. And that might well be the father's fault, for Frédéric had an almost morbid horror of showing his feelings.

Philippe he knew to be capable of sharp practice on occasion; he had learnt of his failure either to send back or to pay for the car he had taken from the garage for his journey to Paris. But one had to allow for the atmosphere in which he had been living recently: in a small, shabby room, with a bankrupt father harassed by creditors and brokers' men. Also it was true that Philippe had no compunctions in his dealings with women, even with an innocent young girl like Martine. But there again, was he wholly to blame? At his last meeting with his father, had he not found a young dancer in his father's bed?

In any case, Frédéric was inclined to hope this lack of scruple was merely a passing phase; the young man was sowing his wild oats.

Still, this letter . . . If Frédéric had spoken his mind out, he'd have said it was "a nasty piece of work." For one thing, it didn't ring true. It had a studied vagueness and evasiveness; moreover, not to mince words, more than a hint of blackmail. That way he

talked about Martine, for instance; about her health and the visit to the specialist. That allusion to a "possible contingency" was an obvious suggestion that a baby might be on the way. And even his insistence on Martine's contentment with her lot and refusal to hear of returning to her family—there was something dubious about it.

In fact, though he didn't dare to say so, Frédéric was rather disgusted with the letter, and he couldn't help wondering if it did not produce the same impression on his old friend, Mme Donadieu, who was still holding it, her brows knitted, pondering deeply.

"After all . . ." she murmured, then fell silent and glanced again at the letter in her hand. "After all, Frédéric, perhaps he's right."

He looked at her wonderingly.

"Really, I know very little about Martine," she continued. "Now that I've been watching her brother rather closely, I shouldn't be surprised if Philippe's telling the truth. She may well have determined to leave home at all costs."

"Yes, that may be so."

"And in that case it was rather a fine thing he did, your youngster. It needed some pluck to saddle himself with a young girl under such conditions."

He was half inclined to warn her: "Steady on! Don't exaggerate his heroism." But, instead, he nodded; temporized.

"Yes, poor boy, he hasn't had an easy start in life."

Abruptly he looked away. An odious thought had just crossed his mind. Watching Mme Donadieu's face, he had noticed a sentimental, almost sensual look in her eyes. And at the same moment a picture had risen before him of Philippe, in the full flush of his twenty-fifth year, with his handsome, clean-cut features, his easy grace. It was not surprising if this woman at the turn of life should feel indulgence for the young man; even for Martine, too, from whose adventure she derived, perhaps, a vicarious thrill.

For over thirty years she had been starved of every pleasure except the mild amenities of family life. And now this letter, which probably had awakened feelings outside Frédéric's ken, seemed to exercise a curious fascination on her.

"Michel, needless to say, will be difficult to deal with. He seems

to think that, as the senior male member of the family, he has stepped into his father's shoes, and carries on accordingly. Really, he overdoes it. And my son-in-law backs him up. One would think that those two had the honour of the Donadieus in their keeping. And Marthe is nearly as bad. Can you imagine what she said to me the other day?"

"What was it?"

"It was about Edmond—Kiki's tutor, you know. I didn't even choose him. Michel put in the advertisement and dealt with the answers. Well, sometimes after dinner Edmond stays on in the drawing-room for an hour or so. Once or twice I've had a game of draughts with him, when Kiki was in bed. And, do you know, my daughter told me I shouldn't do this—it might give rise to gossip! What makes it so ridiculous is that the poor boy's young enough to be my son, and so shy that he apologizes when he wins a game. Her latest idea is that he shouldn't have his meals with us, but in a room by himself. However, needless to say, I put my foot down about that. . . . Go and see what they're doing."

"Who?" Frédéric sounded puzzled.

"Kiki and Edmond."

He did as she asked, and knocked at Kiki's door.

"Come in."

He noticed that Kiki put his hand behind his back, to hide the cigarette he had been smoking. Sitting with his back to the radiator, his legs across another chair, the boy was reading. Seated at the table, his cheek propped on his arm, Edmond was playing chess by himself. On catching sight of Frédéric he sprang to his feet.

"Don't bother to get up. Carry on with your game."

"Sorry. . . . I didn't see you come in. I was trying to work out a problem—the Fool's Mate they call it in my book—but I've got stuck."

It was a sunless day, and the room was even darker because of the trees outside. Smoke hung in the air, though Edmond was not smoking. The room had the cheerful disorder of a student's diggings, and the two youths seemed quite at their ease in it.

"Happy New Year, Kiki, old chap."

"Happy New Year," the boy responded, rather surlily. He

always regarded Frédéric as in league with "the old gang"—his mother and the rest of the family, Martine excepted.

"Have a smoke." Frédéric held out his cigarette-case.

"No, thanks."

"Oh, come now! One should start smoking at your age. I did, anyhow. . . . What's that you're reading? Ah, *The Viscount of Bragelonne*. Which reminds me; I've a complete set of Dumas's works that isn't doing anything. That'll be my New Year's present to you, Kiki.—Monsieur Edmond, would you mind calling in at my place for it this afternoon?"

"Certainly, Monsieur Dargens. With pleasure."

No detail of the scene had escaped Frédéric's notice; he realized that Kiki was already devoted to his young tutor, heart and soul. For the first time in his life, perhaps, the boy had found a friend, someone in whom he could confide. And the room, too, seemed to have come alive; its dreariness had given place to an atmosphere of warmth and well-being.

"Did you say you were trying the Fool's Mate?"

"Yes."

"Well, you've moved the wrong pawn. Look! If you don't get the Queen clear . . . May I show you?"

And in five moves Frédéric announced checkmate with a smile; then, as he walked to the door, reminded Edmond:

"Don't forget to come round for the books. . . . Bye-bye, Kiki."

On his return to the drawing-room he found Mme Brun there, clad in rustling silk as usual. He bent to kiss her hand and give the season's greetings.

"Well, what news, friend courtier?" she asked playfully.

He looked at her questioningly.

"Yes, that's how I always think of you. You're the last of our courtiers, you have all the graces of the old régime. And aren't you attached to the Court of our charming hostess? Also, I hear, you often have a cup of tea—a dish of tay, perhaps I ought to call it—with the fascinating Eva."

"If it's as you say," he smiled, "that's because I've never dared to knock at your door, greatly as I'd like to."

Mme Brun beamed on him; then resumed her conversation with Mme Donadieu.

“You were saying, dear, that Martine . . . ?”

“She’s in Paris, staying with one of our cousins. It was so dull for her at home, you know. That’s how it always is for the youngest member of a family, isn’t it? Their brothers and sisters are married and have children, when they’re just starting life. I quite understand how boring it must seem, being shut up with a lot of older people who have quite different tastes. As Frédéric was saying just now . . .”

He shrugged his shoulders evasively, conscious that Mme Donadieu was trying to shift the onus of the conversation on to him. Then he got up and poured himself out a drink.

“I think I’ll have a glass of port too, Monsieur Dargens,” said Mme Brun. “And one of those honey-puffs, please. I simply dote on honey.”

She was a woman who doted on everything—never merely liked it—and would go into raptures as profuse over a tea-shop bun as over a culinary chef d’œuvre.

“Thanks, Don Juan.”

Frédéric played up again; he knew what the old lady wanted.

“A Don Juan out of luck. You aren’t on his list of conquests.”

The familiar New Year’s atmosphere had changed with Mme Brun’s coming; her slightly malicious archness got on his nerves. And when he heard her saying with a would-be innocent air: “And how’s your son, Michel? Isn’t he in?” he thought to himself, “Yes, you old cat. I wouldn’t mind betting you’ve a copy of *The Laundry* in your pocket.”

“It must be a fearful strain for him,” Mme Brun continued, “having to shoulder the responsibility of so big a business at his age.”

What rubbish the woman talked! Michel was thirty-seven, and what did the “responsibility” amount to?

But Mme Brun had come with the intention of saying certain things, and she said them.

“How lucky he is to have a wife who helps and understands him so well! As your next-door neighbour I feel, if you don’t mind my saying so, a special interest in your family, and . . .”

"Have another cake," Frédéric cut in.

"No, thanks. By the way, what's the latest news of your young scapegrace?" She had promised Charlotte to mention Philippe, and was keeping her word. She had even promised to say: "If he doesn't turn over a new leaf, there won't be breathing-space left in La Rochelle. How many young toddlers do we owe to him already?"

And she said it. Then, for all her natural effrontery, somewhat abashed, she beat a quick retreat, murmuring something about a call to pay on the mayor's wife.

IX

ABOVE each desk a small, green-shaded lamp hung low, with the effect that each man could be seen bending over a little pool of brightness that intensified the darkness round him. Some of the older members of the staff, used to oil-lamps or gaslight, even added a ring of cardboard to their lampshades, further to restrict the light. Caught in the beams from a street-lamp on the quay, flurries of raindrops glittered on the window-panes.

Manager's Office. Fisheries. This was Mme Donadieu's department, and she, too, seemed penned within the circle of light cast by a green-shaded lamp standing on her desk. Pencil in hand, she was listening to a long explanation from a man who was seated in an armchair facing her, hardly distinguishable from the surrounding gloom. He was her legal adviser, and the subject under discussion was the new quota system and its bearing on the import of soles and cod from Holland.

Cold Storage. Sales. Here, as it so happened, Olsen was taking things easy for the moment. On his desk an illustrated magazine lay open at an article on golf, and while he read he was idly pencil-lining grotesque little figures along the margin. His busy time was in the mornings, at flood tide. In any case, the weather had been so stormy for the last few days that the fishing-fleet had been unable to put out.

Anthracite. Briquets. This department, on the first floor, was

always the busiest, and often Michel Donadieu, in the course of a discussion with his brother-in-law, would say superiorly :

“Where should we be if it wasn’t for my briquets ?”

There was some truth in this. The briquets, made of amalgamated slack and, owing to their shape, known as “ovoids,” brought in twice as much as the fisheries branch. You could hardly enter any cottage or farmhouse in that part of France without seeing, on the wall, a calendar depicting an object like a big black egg embellished with a coloured filigree that was quite a work of art, and blazoned in gold letters : *“Donadieu Ovoids. The Perfect Fuel.”*

Michel was talking to one of his rural agents, a burly man in hobnailed boots that had already wrought havoc on the red carpet. Twice during their conversation Joseph, Michel’s office-messenger, had come in and whispered something in his employer’s ear.

“Didn’t you tell him I was out ?” Michel asked petulantly.

“Yes, sir. I told him.”

“Well ?”

“He said he’d heard your voice.”

“How did he seem ? Excited ?”

“I couldn’t rightly say, sir.”

Michel glared at Joseph, whose obtuseness had been proverbial in the office for nearly forty years.

“But, damn it all, man, can’t you give me an idea of how he’s behaving ?”

“He’s sitting on a chair.”

“Yes, yes. What I mean is, does he look—er—calm ?”

“Well, he seemed fretful-like about the time. I keep my watch on my desk, and he got up once or twice to look at it.”

“Tell him . . . yes, tell him I’m having an important business talk and shan’t be free for an hour or two.” Turning to the agent, he said in a louder tone : “Sorry for this interruption. I agree to your proposals and hope to look in at your place some time next week. Good day. . . . No, you’d better leave by that door.”

He pointed to a door leading to another office ; that way he wouldn’t cross the waiting-room going out. For some moments Michel remained standing, his head outside the zone of light. Then

abruptly he came to a decision, pressed a bell-push, and turned towards a massive door that opened at once.

“Is he still there?”

“Yes, but he told me he could only wait another twenty minutes as he’s driving the 912.”

“What’s that?”

“It must be a train, sir. He’s wearing a railwayman’s cap.”

“Do you mean he has it on?” Michel couldn’t repress a movement of vexation at the idea of someone sitting in the ante-room with his cap on.

“No, sir. I meant that he had it on when he came. He’s taken it off.”

“Ask Monsieur Olsen to come and see me for a moment.”

Michel walked to the window, and gazed down thoughtfully at the rain-swept quay, a passing umbrella, the vagrant gleams on the dark surface of the harbour. He was still in a brown study when the door opened, and he gave a start on hearing footsteps approaching him.

“Oh, it’s you.”

Olsen was in grey; he had a calm and cheerful air—as if nothing were the matter!

“Shut the door, please,” Michel said. “Did you notice anything?”

“Where?”

“In the ante-room.”

“Oh, there are five or six people waiting.”

“And one of them is . . . Listen, Jean! Baillet’s there.”

“The devil he is! Are you going to see him?”

“Well, what would you advise?”

“Why didn’t you have him told that you were out?”

“I did.”

“Or that you were engaged?”

“Nothing will make him budge.”

“Any idea of the mood he’s in?”

“I asked Joseph. It seems he keeps looking at the time. That might mean anything.”

While speaking, Michel had unlocked the left-hand drawer

of his desk and taken out a revolver, which he was handling gingerly.

"Look here, Jean. *You* see him. He has nothing against you, and you could explain much better. . . ."

"Why on earth should *I* see him? What a ridiculous idea!"

"I don't see anything ridiculous about it," Michel retorted sulkily.

The trouble was that Olsen refused to take this business seriously, and wasn't in the least impressed by his brother-in-law's panic or the revolver on the table.

"Is mother still here?"

"Yes."

Her office was immediately below, and in it one could hear every footstep in the room above; even what was being said, if the voices were at all loud. Indeed, during Oscar Donadieu's lifetime Michel had made a point of entering on tiptoe whenever he arrived late at office.

"Don't you understand? I'm afraid he's going to make a row."

"That's possible. But it's no reason for not seeing him."

"Look here! Would you mind being present, anyhow, when I'm seeing him?"

"Oh, I don't mind, if you're so keen on it. But it'll look rather silly."

"I wonder if he's armed?"

Joseph knocked at the door and announced that the gentleman was in a hurry, because of the 912.

"Show him in."

Michel's heart sank; nevertheless he put back the revolver, taking care to leave the drawer slightly open. Olsen retreated to a dark corner and sat down. A moment later the door opened and a gnome-like little man came in—his head hardly reached Michel's shoulder—with a narrow, ferret-like face and knobbly limbs.

"Monsieur Baillet, I believe?" said Michel.

"That's my name." The man remained standing, cap in hand.

"Sit down, please. Sorry to have kept you waiting, but I was exceedingly busy. And I can only give you a few minutes, I'm afraid; I have an appointment with a representative of the Chamber of Commerce for—"

"I shan't keep you long. I got to be back in three-quarters of an hour, to drive the 912."

"Ah, yes. You're an engine-driver, I understand."

"Aye, and I've been one these thirty years. Ain't Odette never told you?"

Fumbling in his pocket, he cast his eyes round the room. On catching sight of Olsen puffing at a cigarette in his corner, he frowned as if he scented a trap. Then, very cautiously, he seated himself on the edge of the chair to which Michel had pointed.

The deeply furrowed forehead gave the impression of a man who has seen much trouble, or takes life hardly. When Michel made a slight movement he gave a violent start. Then abruptly he whipped a paper out of his pocket and held it up.

"You've seen this, eh?" *The Laundry*, of course. After a few moments' silence he went on: "This is as man to man, ain't it? Your dad, he was a proper man, I've heard tell, and I reckon you take after him. So I says to myself, 'We'll have a straight talk, Monsieur Donadieu and me. And if he's a man like his old dad, he'll tell me the truth.'"

In his little zone of light Michel nodded gravely; it was passing off better than he'd expected. So far the railwayman had kept his eyes fixed on the floor; now he looked up.

"So that's it. I've come to see you."

Michel gave a slight cough before speaking.

"That paper is a scurrilous rag, of course. . . ."

"I found it in my letter-box. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw that bit about 'Odette B.'—meaning my daughter."

Really, both of them were equally embarrassed; to keep himself in countenance, the railwayman extracted a big silver watch from his pocket and looked at the time.

"Is it a fact that Odette's in a nursing-home?"

Michel would have liked to have his brother-in-law in view, but as it so happened, Baillet was between them.

"It's an absolute lie."

"And is all the rest in the paper a pack of lies? What they say about her being in the family way, and going to see a woman about it? I must say I never noticed nothing, though we're living

in the same house. But we don't see much of each other anyhow, as I'm on night trains mostly. And Odette takes after her poor mother; she's as tight as a clam about her own affairs."

"She's an excellent clerk."

"That don't surprise me. At the training-school where she was they thought no end of her; the principal, as they call him, told me she was the best student of her year."

One might have thought the interview was going to continue on these lines, with an exchange of commonplace amenities. Then, quite suddenly, when he least expected it, Michel saw a look of suspicion come to Baillet's eyes, and heard him say, though without any show of feeling :

"So that's all you got to say about it? What's written in this here paper's a lot of dirty lies? My daughter ain't in a nursing-home, or anything of that sort? . . . All right. Then tell me straight—where is she just now?"

"Hasn't she let you know?"

"All she told me was that you'd given her a thousand francs besides her pay to do a job for you, at Bordeaux."

"Yes, that was it."

"At the time I didn't pay no attention. I'd been driving the 434, and she's a bitch; what's more, it was freezing pretty near all the way to Paris. . . . Why did you pick on her for that Bordeaux job?"

"Because she's my confidential clerk."

"Is it here she works?" He cast another glance round the office.

"No." Michel pointed to a door. "In that room."

"By herself?"

"Yes."

One had an impression that the railwayman was trying to figure out the conditions under which his daughter worked, and the relations between her and her employer.

"Well, if that's how it is," he suddenly remarked, "I'll go there myself."

"Where?"

"To Bordeaux. But I can't go right away. I got to drive the

912 to Paris. Then I've forty-eight hours off. Aye, I'll go to Bordeaux, and see for myself. But, wait a bit! You ain't told me where she's stopping. She didn't give me her address."

"At . . . at the *Hôtel de la Poste*, I believe," Michel answered quickly. He vaguely remembered staying at an hotel of that name when doing his military service.

"Good. Then I'll know if you've been bluffing, or if you're on the straight. After that, I'll have a word with that there Doctor Lambe."

He picked up the paper, which was lying on the table, folded it in four and put it in his pocket.

"I don't want you to make no mistake, sir. I ain't one of the goody-goody sort, and I know what girls are like nowadays, and . . . accidents will happen, as they say. Still, there's some things . . ."

His cap in one hand, he held out the other rather diffidently. Michel was almost more uncomfortable than the railwayman when it came to shaking hands.

"I'll be round again one of these days and tell you how she is."

The door opened and closed again. Michel remained quite still for some minutes, then summoned Joseph.

"Has he gone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you quite sure he's left the building?"

"Well, I saw him going down the staircase."

"How did he look?"

"Like someone going away."

Michel scowled, then said abruptly:

"Right. You can go. If anyone wants to see me, say I'm out."

"There's the inspector from the gasworks. He says he has an appointment."

"Tell him I'm very sorry, but I'm not feeling well. Ask him to come again tomorrow."

At last Michel was free to turn to Olsen.

"Well, what did you make of it? Either the man's a half-wit, or . . ."

"I agree."

"What do you mean?"

"I think as you do. Either he's a born fool, or he's playing some deep game."

"Do you think he believed what I said?"

"It doesn't seem so, considering he's going to Bordeaux."

"Ah, yes. Bordeaux. . . . Look here, Jean, will you do me a favour? It might look queer if I went there myself. Would you mind going to Bordeaux tonight? Odette's fit enough to be moved, I should say. Please take her to the *Hôtel de la Poste* and . . . do the necessary. You follow? She'd better say I sent her to collect statistics at the Shipping Office."

Looking anything but pleased, Olsen asked :

"And suppose the doctor says she can't be moved?"

"Oh, it would only be a matter of putting in an appearance at the hotel for a few hours. Once her father's seen her . . ."

He fell to pacing up and down the room, unmindful of his mother's presence immediately below. At one moment, without thinking, he switched on the light in Odette's little room. He gave a slight shiver; the air in it seemed cold and dank.

Strictly speaking, it wasn't a separate room, but an annexe to Michel's office, and this peculiarity, indeed, had been his undoing. The window was set high in the wall and the panes were of frosted glass, like all those on this side of the building. Thirty years before, Oscar Donadieu had noticed that his staff were apt to waste their time gazing at the houses opposite, and accordingly had had the frosted glass put in, little dreaming . . .

A small desk with a typewriter; a filing-cabinet; some curtained-off shelves—no more than that. The memorandum-block that Odette had been using on the last day still lay beside the typewriter.

She was no beauty; not even pretty. Unlike her father, whose smallness had been a surprise to Michel, she was exceptionally tall, one of those gawky, austere-looking young women who give an impression of relentless virtue. Though only twenty-two, she had already lost her youthful freshness, and looked ten years older, and—perhaps as a result of working in this cell-like little room—had a grey, washed-out complexion.

But, all the same, it had happened. True, the going had been so

slow as to be almost imperceptible. And it was at this hour, five o'clock, when the lamps had been turned on, and over each desk in the Donadieu building a head was bent, aureoled in the yellow glow of a green-shaded lamp, that it had begun.

"Mademoiselle Odette," Michel had called.

He dictated some letters, which she took down in shorthand, standing beside his desk. For she had always refused to sit down in her employer's office. Another incidental cause, perhaps!

"... and we propose in the near future to undertake the manufacture and sale of . . . of . . . Just a moment. Let me hear what went before, please."

Abruptly he had stopped walking up and down the room, and halted behind her, as if to see what she had written, though he could not read shorthand. And, as he bent forward, his shoulder brushed hers.

That was the first of several successive phases, each of which lasted for weeks. During the second phase he remained seated, but brought his chair near Odette, and gently stroked her hips. She went on working, as if unaware of this. Then one evening, when his caresses became slightly bolder, she looked round and said rather weakly:

"No. . . . Please don't. . . ."

He hardly gave a thought to her in the daytime; only when night was falling and the lamps were lit, it came over him quite suddenly, a craving he could not resist.

"Mademoiselle Odette! I've some letters to dictate."

On one occasion they were all but caught by Joseph; Michel drew his chair back only just in time.

At last an evening came when, greatly daring, he walked into the little room off his office, where she was typing letters.

"Show me that letter, please. There are some words to change."

She was seated at her typewriter, and he was standing behind her. He had only to bend forward, to have her in his arms.

"Take care!"

"Why?"

She pointed to the frosted window on which their outlines

could be seen from outside, like figures in a shadow-play. . . . So she consented! So . . .

And next evening he placed the lamp between them and the window, so that their shadows wouldn't show. She tried to free herself.

"Please, Monsieur Michel. . . . You mustn't do that."

"Why not?"

"Suppose your wife . . ."

But really she was easy game. Presently he returned to his office and stood for some minutes at the misted window, letting his nerves calm down, and running a pocket-comb through his hair. From that moment until the same hour next evening he almost hated her, and saw as little of her as possible, addressing her with involuntary curtness.

On one occasion only had there been a departure from this ritual. A big stock of jute was being sold at Niort, where a firm of jute-importers had just gone into liquidation, and the Donadieu used large quantities of jute for their coal-sacks. Michel had the idea of taking Odette with him in his car, on the pretext that her services were needed.

On the return journey he drove with one hand, fondling her with the other. Then, yielding to an uncontrollable uprush of desire, he had turned off the main road, driven to Papelet's "château," and asked for a room. Odette was nervous, on the brink of tears. But, after he had persuaded her to drink two glasses of port, her scruples were dust before the wind. . . . "Accidents will happen," as old Bajlet had observed. Was it then that the "accident" had happened?

"But what am I to tell my wife?" Olsen asked peevishly.

"Oh, you can think up some yarn, can't you?"

"And what if Odette refuses to come with me?"

"She won't. She'll realize it's in her interest quite as much as ours."

"I'd better give her some money, hadn't I?"

"Yes. Not too much, though. It might look fishy if it came out."

"How much?"

"Let's see. . . . Two thousand francs."

"Shall I take it from the cash? What shall I make out the voucher for? . . . Ssh! There's your mother coming."

That, anyhow, was a blessing; the tapping of her stick on the stairs always gave warning of her approach.

"What have you two been up to?" she asked Michel. "I could hear you moving about."

"Oh, nothing really. We've been discussing a . . . a contract."

Perhaps some instinct told her he was lying. She looked round the room suspiciously, and even seemed to sniff the air.

"I've something to tell you, Michel."

"Well, for the moment I'm . . ."

"Of course! Whenever I want to talk to you, you're up to your eyes in work. But this time you shan't put me off. . . . Frédéric's just been to see me."

"Here?"

"Why shouldn't he come here? He's had another letter from Philippe, who's doing very well in Paris. He even sent a thousand francs for his father to give to the man who owns the garage where he worked—as an instalment on the car he took. In my opinion, that's a very good sign."

"It would have been a better sign if he hadn't taken the car at all."

"Don't be tiresome!"

Michel turned to Olsen.

"That's settled, then. I can count on you?"

"All right—as you say it's necessary."

Michel sat down again, facing his mother, a sulky look on his face.

"We'll have to come to a decision sooner or later," she said, "and the longer we put it off, the worse it will be for us. People are beginning to smell a rat. It's all very well our saying that Martine's gone to Paris to study art. But—a Donadieu studying art! You must admit it doesn't sound convincing."

She said "a Donadieu" almost as if she were not one of the family. And indeed, if half unconsciously, she drew distinctions.

For her, Michel, especially, typified the essential Donadieu, and so, of course, did Marthe; Olsen, too, though an outsider, almost qualified to rank with them, so precisely had he fallen into line.

Eva was definitely no Donadieu, and if Mme Donadieu had no great liking for her, she had to recognize her independence and originality. Eva was, in fact, a foreign body in the household, her exoticism symbolized by her pseudo-Chinese boudoir with its black velvet hangings and aggressively un-bourgeois atmosphere.

One couldn't be sure about Kiki, as yet. He had Donadieu phases, but others too; sometimes he had the Donadieu look in his eyes, and sometimes a very different one, that disquieted his mother.

"Anyhow," she concluded, "we must put our heads together and get it settled one way or the other. If necessary, I'll ask her guardian to come and give us his views."

"I don't see the need for all this haste."

"That's because you don't know. . . . I happen to be better posted as to the facts than you are. Philippe writes regularly to his father, and Frédéric—I must say it's very decent of him—lets me see the letters."

"Written, no doubt," sneered Michel, "with the idea that you should see them."

"I don't agree, but, even if you're right, it makes no difference. None of you knows the first thing about Philippe. He went to Paris without a penny in his pocket, and with a girl on his hands, and he's made good without help from anyone. In fact, he can get on quite well without us."

"And so can we, without him."

For the moment Michel had almost forgotten about Odette, and Olsen's errand. But then he heard the car starting up, and he made a nervous movement in his chair; he would have preferred Olsen to take the train.

"What's the matter?" his mother asked.

"Nothing."

"That was Jean, wasn't it? Where's he going?"

"To Bordeaux. He's meeting an Italian importer there tonight."

His mother glanced at him for a moment, then came back to her subject.

"As I was saying, we can't go on ignoring Martine's existence. And the longer we wait, the worse it is—I mean, the greater the risk of a scandal. In his last letter Philippe said quite clearly that he thought there was a baby on the way."

Michel's shoulders sagged. That last remark had made him crumple up completely. He felt dazed, incapable of standing up to his mother. If only Olsen were back already, with news from Bordeaux!

"Listen, mother," he began; then fell silent.

"So that's settled," she said briskly, getting up from her chair. "I'll write tomorrow to her guardian. We'll see what he has to say."

"Very well."

He closed the door behind her, but it opened again at once.

"There's still three people waiting," Joseph announced.

"What do they want?"

"Two want jobs as agents for the briquets. The other one . . ." He paused.

"Well? Get it out, man!"

"I think he's an insurance agent. He says . . ."

"Tell him I've left."

"But they must have seen you when I came in."

"Say I've just gone, by another door."

His mind was in chaos, he felt like weeping. But the tears wouldn't come. And he was tired, dog-tired.

After lingering in his office till the ante-room had emptied, Michel went straight home. Through a ground-floor window he had a glimpse of Kiki and his tutor playing ping-pong on the dining-room table.

The staircase was in darkness. He could hear a child whimpering; his daughter, Evette. As he entered the hall he noticed a smell of Turkish cigarettes, and, frowning, was about to walk past an open door, that of his wife's boudoir. He had noticed Frédéric's coat and hat on the hat-stand. But then he heard his wife calling him.

"Yes, I'm back. What do you want?"

"Come here for a moment, please."

He found them, as usual, sitting on cushions strewn on the floor.

"Good evening, Frédéric," he mumbled.

"Do sit down," said his wife. "I rang up Frédéric and asked him round to tell us what he'd do if he were in your position."

He had his mother's gift of intuition, and already, before entering, had known that something disagreeable was in store.

"Why 'in my position'?"

"You know quite well why." She pushed towards him with her foot a folded copy of *The Laundry*.

Her sandalled feet were bare, the toe-nails painted scarlet. As usual, she was puffing a cigarette, and a blue smoke-cloud coiled above their heads. The light was even dimmer than in the office on the Quai Vallin. In one corner squatted Eva's latest exoticism, a fat bronze Buddha, round which, to amuse herself, she had installed a little shrine, complete with offerings and joss-sticks.

"There's no need to look so glum," she continued. "I'm not going to scold you. But I suppose you realize this business might land you in no end of trouble. What do you propose to do about it?"

Nothing, evidently! He scowled at Frédéric. Why must they needs drag this fellow into all the family affairs?

"Does my sister know?" he asked.

"Marthe? Yes, she knows. In fact, it was she who brought me the paper. She doesn't want mother to see it. She told me to let her know the moment you came back."

"What does *she* want?"

"We must fix up how much to offer. I suppose it's a question of money. Don't you agree, Frédéric?"

"Well, if you want my opinion, the first step to take is to see that the girl isn't made to undergo a risky operation."

Michel winced. That was the one thing of which he didn't want to be reminded. On the verge of collapse, he pulled himself together at the last moment.

"Oh, it's not so bad as all that."

"Shall I call Marthe?" his wife asked. "She must have heard you coming in."

Eva's method of summoning her sister-in-law was peculiar. All she did was to rap the radiator with her knuckles; the pipes communicated with the room upstairs. And a few moments later Marthe joined them. She sniffed disgustedly.

"What a fug! Let's go up to my room."

In her room the atmosphere was crystal-clear, and decorum reigned.

"No, I'd rather stay here." Though it was six in the evening, Eva had practically nothing on under her kimono, and the mere thought of going up the draughty staircase made her shudder.

Marthe consented with a bad grace, but first went to the dining-room to get a chair, a real chair.

"Well, Michel, what are you going to do about it?"

Deliberately she ignored Frédéric, of whom she disapproved on principle. And now all the Donadieu instincts in her were in revolt against the presence of an outsider on such an occasion.

"Where's Jean?"

"He's gone to Bordeaux. It would take too long explaining. Odette's father came to the office this afternoon."

"Did you see him?"

"Yes. He's going to look her up tomorrow, he said. I told him she was at the *Hôtel de la Poste*, and that I'd sent her there on a job for the firm."

"He's a Breton," Frédéric put in.

"Well, what if he is?"

"Oh, nothing. . . . But I happen to know the man and, as I said, he's a Breton."

Marthe shrugged her shoulders impatiently, while Michel, who had no experience of Bretons and their proverbial tenacity, tried in vain to guess the point of Frédéric's interjection.

"He's an engine-driver on a night train," Michel explained. "Anyhow, I gather it's really that swine Lambe he's got his knife into."

Frédéric put in another remark,

"For the moment, yes. But once he's had a talk with Lambe he'll have it into someone else."

"Can't you keep your mouth shut?" Marthe exclaimed irritably.

"I'll keep it shut after I've said just one thing more—that there's someone here who's within an ace of being hauled up before the Assize Court."

Marthe could contain herself no longer.

"And there's someone else here who's been within an ace of getting jailed for five years past."

"Thanks for the kind reminder." Frédéric bowed ironically, and rose to his feet.

"No, don't go!" begged Eva. Then, looking at the others, she added: "Don't you realize he's the only one who can advise us what to do? If only Marthe would get off her high horse . . ."

"Perhaps you'd rather I left?" suggested Marthe with a sour look at her sister-in-law.

Michel hardly heard what was being said; he felt like an in-expert swimmer who has ventured out of his depth and is groping for a foothold on the shingle. But once more he pulled himself together.

"Now let *me* speak, for a change. I've done everything possible, to the best of my belief. This afternoon I announced my resignation from the monument committee. That's what Lambe was after, isn't it? And I shall not stand at the next election, however good my chances. As for the girl . . ."

Eva didn't show a trace of jealousy; indeed, she was looking at her husband with new interest, surprised he had it in him to have embarked on such an adventure.

"It's a matter of money," he continued. "I'll be able to square her easily enough."

"Unless she dies," Frédéric put in.

"And what then?"

"There'll be an inquest."

"That can't be helped. . . . Anyhow, it was her idea, not mine."

"What idea?" asked Marthe.

"The idea of . . . of getting rid of 'it.' She told me she knew where to go, and everything would be quite all right."

While he spoke there had been the sound of the front door opening. And Mme Donadieu's stick could now be heard tapping on the stairs, and presently her voice—whose piercing tone had always vexed her husband :

“Good ! I see you're coming to your senses. Well, what have you decided ? Fetch me a chair, Frédéric.”

There was a short silence. Mme Donadieu, who was out of breath, sank heavily into the armchair.

“My view is this. The sooner we get them married, the less trouble all round. And I'd have you know that Frédéric hasn't tried to talk me over. Quite the contrary. . . . Isn't that so, Eva ?”

“That's so,” murmured Eva, whose thoughts were elsewhere.

“Well then ?” Mme Donadieu was struck by the gloomy looks of the others, and wondered what the reason could be. “All right, if you take it like that, I've a pleasant little surprise for some of you. Go and fetch my marriage-lines, someone, and Michel's birth-certificate. Then I'll ask you to compare the dates. You'll notice . . .”

“Mother ! Stop !” cried Michel, jumping to his feet.

“I will, if you'll explain . . .”

“Don't say any more, mother. Or wait, anyhow, till we're between ourselves.”

“Don't be absurd ! Do you imagine Frédéric doesn't know ?”

“Stop, I tell you !” Michel's voice rose to a scream, and he stamped his foot. He seemed to be on the brink of hysterics.

X

No single person could claim to know the whole story, from start to finish, and of those who knew fragments of the truth, many thought fit to keep these to themselves. Moreover, as in most cases of the kind, these people were not acquainted with each other, so there was no question of pooling their information.

Even as regards the weather there was no agreement ; if questioned, some would have told you, “It was raining deluges,” and others, “It was a moonlight night, and freezing hard.”

Yet both groups would have been referring to the same night, the night that followed Baillet's interview with Michel. Soon after the railwayman left, the light drizzle changed abruptly to a downpour; people in the street took to their heels, and got home drenched to the skin.

But at the same hour, for Baillet, it was a clear night. On leaving Niort he saw a full moon riding low in a pale wintry sky, and frost-flowers began to form on the windows of the train.

The engine-driver was at his post, one arm resting on the steel rim of the cab, peering ahead through the small circular look-out window, watching for the signals, while his fireman swung his shovel beside him.

Miles and miles of rails in glimmering recession, flanked by silvery seas of meadows; black scarps of woodlands; a clangour of dark iron as the train crossed the Loire; at each stop a station-master fussing up and down the train, all self-importance. . . .

Olsen did not reach the nursing-home, which was on the outskirts of Bordeaux, till ten o'clock and, had he not seen some lights still on in the building, would probably have postponed his visit to the next morning. He had thought it wiser not to take the chauffeur, and, as the rain drove round the windscreen, his left arm and shoulder were soaked through.

Here, as at La Rochelle, it was raining heavily. The outer gate was locked, and Olsen was kept waiting at it for five minutes under the downpour. To add to his distress, a big dog just inside the railings started growling savagely.

There was nothing of the hospital about the place, no rows of beds in white-enamelled wards, no uniformed nurses, or stretchers on rubber-tyred wheels to convey patients to the operating-theatre. It was more like a rest home—for the kind of rest that Odette needed.

A man with a small pointed beard opened the door and led Olsen into a vestibule from which he had a glimpse of three people at a bridge-table in a dingy-looking dining-room. Two of the three were youngish women, and for a moment he wondered if one of them was Odette.

“This way, please.”

The bearded man was the doctor. He showed Olsen into his consulting-room. Raindrops sparkled on his beard, as he had had to cross a strip of garden to open the front gate. Olsen explained his errand in as few words as might be, adding :

“You understand the position, I hope? It’s most desirable that tomorrow, when her father comes to Bordeaux, he should find her at an hotel.”

At first the doctor hummed and hawed—to make his visitor appreciate his importance—then, after tugging at his pepper-and-salt beard, rose heavily to his feet.

“Under these circumstances I have no objection. Perhaps you would prefer that I should talk to her?”

“That would make things easier. You’re used to handling such situations, of course.”

After leaving the room, the doctor returned almost immediately, to Olsen’s surprise. Then, looking hard at him, he said :

“There’s one point we overlooked. Suppose that, for some reason, she doesn’t return here . . . ?” Seeing that Olsen had not taken his meaning, he added : “It would be best to settle up at once, I think. I’ll make out the bill.”

And this he proceeded to do, with painstaking deliberation, carefully weighing up how much to write against each item. Meanwhile, Olsen supposed, the three women were still waiting for him, at the bridge-table, to resume the game; Odette, presumably, was already in bed, perhaps asleep.

“You will not require a stamped receipt, I take it?”

Just as well, Olsen thought, that I brought a largish sum of money with me. I shouldn’t have cared to give that fellow a cheque.

The doctor went out to fetch Odette, and was absent for a quarter of an hour. But, as Olsen had noticed, he did everything with exasperating slowness. And he was quite capable of having halted on his way, to finish a hand of bridge with the three women. At last the door opened and Olsen saw the doctor standing beside it in the dimly lit corridor.

“Here’s Mademoiselle Odette; she is quite agreeable to going with you.”

In the dim light Olsen had a glimpse of a tall, gaunt young woman in a black coat, with a very pale face and expressionless grey eyes. She greeted him rather shyly.

"I must apologize, Mademoiselle," Olsen began, "but—"

"I've explained," the doctor interrupted, and shepherded them to the door, obviously in haste to get back to his rubber.

When they were at the gate, Olsen asked:

"Would you rather sit behind, or beside me?"

She chose to sit beside him and, by way of making conversation, said:

"Has it been raining like this for long?"

"All the way from La Rochelle. . . . Were you in bed?"

"Yes, but I hadn't gone to sleep."

"Don't you play bridge?"

"No."

Bordeaux at last! He knew the city well, but invariably lost his way when entering it, getting his bearings only as he neared the centre. The *Hôtel de la Poste*, he discovered, was nowhere near the Central Post Office, but in a side street behind the Opera-House, flanked by small cabarets with photographs of half-naked girls adorning the windows.

"Michel"—yes, surely with her there was no need to call him "Monsieur Donadieu"—"Michel suggests you'd better tell your father that you've been sent here to collect statistics at the Shipping Office."

"Yes, that would sound all right. Anyhow, I won't have any trouble with father, I should say."

"Sure you're not feeling too tired?" He was haunted by the fear that she might faint or be taken ill.

"No. I'm stronger now. Shall I have to stay here long?"

"He'll let you know when to come back."

"Suppose father asks the hotel people how long I've been there?"

Olsen shrugged his shoulders. There were bound to be some risks, but he'd done all that could be done. The office at the hotel being closed, he was about to get out and ring the bell, when he saw that Odette had discovered the night porter and was talking to

him. Evidently she fixed it up satisfactorily, for after a moment the door closed behind them.

He didn't feel like facing the hundred-and-twenty mile journey back to La Rochelle, and he was extremely hungry. After a belated dinner at a *brasserie* he drove to an hotel he knew in the centre, and slept the night there.

Baillet reached Paris at midnight and, after prowling round the dimly lit station for half an hour, discovered a goods-train leaving for Bordeaux. On seeing his uniform the guard cleared him a place amidst a stack of fish-boxes, and even offered him a cigarette.

This took place at the Montparnasse terminus, and in the Montparnasse district, at the same hour, Martine was sitting opposite a fair young man, while Philippe, beside her, conversed with his *vis-à-vis*, a small, anaemic-looking young woman. They were in a cabaret, and all four were drinking champagne.

Martine had danced twice with Albert Grindorge, the fair young man; the two couples were on friendly terms and were already calling each other by their Christian names. Mme Grindorge, who seldom went out at night, was wearing a rather ill-fitting semi-evening dress in gold *lamé*. Philippe had just danced with her.

For them, too, this evening was by way of being a climax, the outcome of a sequence of trivial events which none of them could have recapitulated in full. Martine could have said something about the early stages, her gradual discovery of the shops in this part of Paris—of one, especially, that provided ready-cooked dishes which she found delicious. But oftener than not, no sooner had she prepared a little dinner in their room than the telephone-bell rang.

"That you, dear? Take a taxi and meet me at the *Etoile*. We're dining out." Sometimes it wasn't Philippe who rang her up. "Monsieur Dargens wants you to meet him at *La Chope*, in the Rue Montmartre," a voice would say.

She went there, and found Philippe with a group of people whom she had never seen before, and to whom he introduced her as his wife.

While they had their meal the men talked business, a different kind of business every time. In the afternoon Philippe sent her to

the pictures, where he joined her later, after telling her to leave a message at the box-office to say where she was sitting.

Arm-in-arm they walked homewards down the brilliantly lighted streets, and Philippe, who had not the least domestic instinct, always found a pretext for lingering on the way. Either he wanted a drink, or he was famished; or else he would insist on dropping in at some American Bar where he rather hoped to meet a fellow who might be useful. In fact, he seemed to have a horror of returning to their room.

Martine enjoyed this life; it was never dull, for one thing. In fact, it was more like a game they were playing. Nothing they did seemed to matter in the least, and she had no idea that the last month's rent had not been paid. . . . Then came that memorable evening when Philippe said to her:

"I want you to buy a new dress, something really *chic*. I've a friend in one of the big stores who'll lend you a fur coat. We've a very important lunch tomorrow."

It was their first lunch with the Grindorges. Martine felt ill at ease all the time because of the fur coat which didn't belong to her, and on which Mme Grindorge commented admiringly.

The Grindorges were an amiable, rather naïve couple. The man was all admiration for Philippe; indeed, there was something of the schoolboy's hero-worship in his attitude. And Mme Grindorge was equally impressed by Martine. "Oh, my dear, how clever you are!" she kept on exclaiming at everything Martine said or did.

Nevertheless, Grindorge was no provincial, but the son of a very successful Paris business man, who had recently retired with a fortune of many millions of francs.

Philippe had had the luck of appearing on the scene just after young Grindorge had stepped into his mother's estate. Twenty-four hours after that meeting they had agreed to join forces in a business venture, Grindorge putting up the first hundred thousand francs of capital required. By the beginning of January they had their own premises and a staff consisting of a typist and half a dozen white-aproned girls who spent most of their time wrapping up bulky parcels. Their concern was named the *P.E.M.*

"What does it stand for?" Martine asked.

"Absolutely nothing!" Philippe chuckled. "That's the whole point—to keep 'em guessing!"

The *P.E.M.* imported gramophone motors from Czechoslovakia, and had fake-mahogany cases made at a joinery in the Rue Saint-Antoine. On the management was a clever young Russian, known as "Monsieur Ivan"—or, for the benefit of outsiders, as "our engineering expert"—under whose supervision the girls rapidly assembled the gramophones and packed them in cartons for delivery.

The advertisement ran: "*A Super Gramophone for the absurdly low price of two hundred and twenty-five francs! This unique offer, which is made to launch our new gramophone on the market, holds good for a strictly limited period, after which the price will be considerably higher.*"

The gramophones cost the firm round about eighty francs apiece, and Albert Grindorge, who so far had lost money on everything he set his hand to, was staggered by the orders pouring in with every mail. One day he had a twinge of conscience about the articles they were selling.

"Are you sure they work all right?" he asked Philippe.

"Oh, they run quite well for a month or two; then they break down, of course. But that's no matter. When we've sold ten thousand we'll switch over to something else."

The two young couples spent their evenings together. Grindorge was greatly smitten with Martine, but too shy to make advances. One evening, when they were dancing together, he asked with a blush:

"I say, I hope this doesn't tire you too much?"

"Not a bit. Why should it?"

"Oh, I thought . . . perhaps dancing mightn't be very good for you just now."

For Philippe had spread the news that his wife was going to have a baby—though nothing was less certain.

Blushing still more deeply, Grindorge went on:

"My wife, you know, had such an awful time with our first."

There were now two children in their pleasant little flat in Neuilly.

As soon as Philippe had some cash in hand he remitted a thousand francs to his former employer, through his father, as a payment on account, for the car he had taken. But he had left even Frédéric in ignorance of his address in Paris.

“If you have any urgent reason to communicate with me,”—he wrote, *“put a ‘Personal’ in the Petit Parisien. Frédéric wants to get in touch with Philippe,’ or something like that. For the moment I am up to my ears in work—fifteen hours a day!—as I have to do everything single-handed.”*

Baillet, the engine-driver, was sleeping in a goods-van reeking of fish. A draught played on the nape of his neck, and sometimes, in his sleep, he ran his hand across it, as if to flick away a fly. He recognized each station by its sound, and half awoke at each stop, only to relapse again into heavy sleep.

On the Saturday they all got up at different times. Philippe, though he had gone to bed in the small hours, left for the workshop at eight. Martine opened a sleepy eye, and promptly dozed off again. There was bright sunshine, but the air was cold. Philippe had trouble in getting his car to start. As he did every morning, he ran his eyes down the “Personal” column of the *Petit Parisien*. There was nothing for him. . . .

At La Rochelle it was still raining and the sky so overcast that Michel could hardly see his face in the shaving-mirror hung on the window-hasp. Once again he thought that he really must get a shaving-mirror fitted with an electric lamp, such as he had seen in one of the big shops, but always put off buying.

He was knotting his tie when the telephone-bell rang. The call was from Olsen, who was still at Bordeaux, to announce that all was well and he was just starting back.

Eva came in while her husband was at the 'phone, and asked without much interest :

“Who is it?”

“Jean. He’s fixed it up all right, thank goodness.”

She was still heavy with sleep, her cheeks moist, her limbs aching. With a low sigh, she raised her hands to settle her dark brown hair.

"Well, I must say you're a disgusting lot," she murmured.

Michel dropped his eyes, conscious that this was only too true. But it didn't prevent his breakfasting off two poached eggs, and toast and marmalade—for he had spent some years in England, and affected English ways. He could hear his little daughter Evette whimpering in the nursery. The small boy was being bathed.

He put on his waterproof, chose one of his oldest hats, and went on foot, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, to the Quai Vallin. As usual, he began by entering the first office on the left, where the mail was being sorted.

Mme Donadieu arrived rather late, as she had spent some minutes scolding Edmond, Kiki's tutor. Once again she had caught them attempting absurd gymnastic feats in the morning-room.

"I won't have you doing circus-tricks like that in the house, do you understand? We engaged you as a tutor, not an acrobat."

It was rough on Edmond, who was boyishly proud of showing off his muscular development; all the more so as he looked far from robust, and, indeed, in early youth had been thought to be consumptive.

"Watch!" he would say to Kiki, and proceed to do some prodigy of equilibrium. "Now, suppose you're being attacked—it doesn't matter how much stronger the other fellow is—this is the position to take up. It's a ju-jitsu stance, really."

And now Kiki could think of nothing but ju-jitsu, chest-measurements, grand circles on the horizontal bar. Clenching his teeth and perspiring freely, he emulated his instructor's feats.

"Why not have an iron bar clamped to this wall?"

In fact, they'd plans on foot to convert the morning-room into a fully equipped gymnasium—until Mme Donadieu put her foot down. But the only effect of her embargo was a transfer of the scene of their activities to a damp, secluded corner of the garden.

A bumper haul—four thousand hake—and, as ill luck would have it, Olsen, whose department was concerned, hadn't put in an appearance. On the wharf, men in sea-boots were floundering in pools of brine as they packed the fish into crates streaming with greenish water from the melting ice. The sea was neither rough

nor smooth; grey, edged with white, it merged into the lowering sky.

The goods-train was held up for nearly an hour at Poitiers. But Baillet, who was awake, managed to slip across to the Bordeaux express and settle down in a first-class carriage. He was soaked through and reeked of fish.

At Bordeaux, Odette was doing her daily treatment as best she could, unaided; this was difficult in an hotel, especially as she didn't want to attract attention. At nine she went downstairs and strolled about the lobby till she saw that the manageress was alone in her office.

"I've something to ask you, Madame. Would you be kind enough to say I've been staying here for some days, if my father calls to see me?"

She cut such a pathetic figure that the grim-faced woman in black finally consented.

"Will you be staying long?"

"Quite likely. I find your hotel so clean and comfortable."

After that she went to a stationer's, bought pencils, memorandum-blocks and file-cases, which on her return she spread out on her bedroom table, so as to give an impression she used the room for working in. But all her movements were languid—as if she hardly cared. . . .

Her father arrived just when she was sitting down for lunch. Really, the two were like strangers, with little in common but that they lived in the same house, a cottage on the Lhomeau Road, with green railings and a small front garden planted with marguerites and marigolds. Odette's mother had met her death fifteen years before, in a stupid way; by catching pneumonia at a neighbour's funeral.

As a rule, Baillet was on duty when others slept, and went to bed when others started their day, with the result that he and his daughter rarely met. He had glimpses of her leaving for the office, or coming back and settling down in the parlour to do typing for a local lawyer who was writing a History of La Rochelle.

Though not overawed by her in any sense, he couldn't help being conscious of the gulf between himself and this well-educated,

neatly dressed girl. She lived in a different atmosphere, was almost a "young lady," and one day she'd told him she had seven thousand francs in the savings-bank.

What perhaps impressed Baillet most was that a charwoman was never needed, and his house was the best kept one in the street. His daughter's efficiency amazed him; he had no idea when she got up, but he could enter any room at any hour of the day and always find it spotlessly clean. The windows were washed every week, the parlour floor was always glossy with beeswax, the kitchen-stove as clean as if it were unused. Yet she never seemed to hurry; he had never caught her with her hair untidy, or perspiration on her face.

As for talking to her—well, for that they'd have needed to be more used to each other. And now, on entering the hotel in his shabby blue suit, with the little bag containing his working-kit in his hand, he found he had forgotten all he'd meant to say.

He saw her sitting by herself at a small table in a corner of the dining-room.

"I'm in Bordeaux by chance-like, and I thought I'd look you up."

"Stay and have lunch with me," she suggested.

Baillet looked so ill at ease when the head-waiter came and stood beside him, order-slip in hand, that Odette gave the order, selecting dishes that she knew her father fancied.

"Like it here?" he asked vaguely.

"Well, I'm on a job, you know." She lowered her eyes.

"Aye, you're collecting . . ." He floundered for the word, and was grateful when his daughter helped him out.

"Yes, I'm collecting statistics at the Shipping Office."

"Is it . . . far from here?"

"On the Quai des Chartres."

It had been on the tip of his tongue to ask the meaning of that word "statistics," but he changed his mind. With one of his fellow-railwaymen he wouldn't have hesitated. But somehow he did not like admitting his ignorance to his daughter.

"You ain't looking too fit. Not feeling seedy?"

"No, I'm quite all right. I've never had much colour, you know. I take after mother."

It lasted an hour. He even tried to throw out hints, and at one moment, watching her from the corner of an eye, remarked :

“There’s one trouble while you’re away ; it’s about the—the laundry . . . the washing, I mean.”

Would she take his meaning ?

But Odette replied quite naturally :

“Doesn’t Madame Bourrat come to do it for you ?”

Without realizing, he’d overeaten and drunk too much.

“Eh, well, I’d best be off.” He rose ponderously and gazed at his daughter, frowning slightly.

It was difficult to judge his state of mind ; clearly he didn’t *know*, but one felt that something, a germ of mistrust, had taken root in the slow-moving brain.

Michel had invited Olsen to lunch so that they could have a talk together. Eva made a show of not listening to what they said, and left the room when the dessert was served.

“Well ? What exactly did she say ?” Michel asked eagerly.

“Nothing. She seems to have no ideas of her own. She just does as she is told.”

“She didn’t—er—say anything against me ?”

“No. She gave me the impression of being very much run down, almost too weak to talk. . . . How’s your wife taking it ?”

Michel shrugged his shoulders. Really, what had happened hadn’t changed things much between them. The breach had taken place two years before, exactly a fortnight after Evette’s birth. They had engaged a young girl as nursemaid, and one day Eva had caught Michel with her in a dark corner of the hall. All she said was :

“You should be more careful. Jean might have seen you.”

That night she slept in a separate bedroom, and thereafter they had always slept apart. This was one of the reasons why Michel sometimes pulled a long face when he found Frédéric in his wife’s boudoir. But what could he do about it ? An altercation would have served no purpose—and anyhow, he wasn’t really sure if he felt jealous.

“By the way, I hear there was a great rumpus, almost a free fight,

at the fish-mart this morning, over that lot of hake that came in. Something about a change in the way the auction was conducted. Camboulives asserts that he'd fixed it up with you, but . . .”

As usual, everyone was back in the office at two; Mme Dona-dieu, Olsen, Michel. It was the hour of Kiki's geography lesson, and while he laboriously sketched a map of France, Edmond made notes for a thesis he had to submit in a few months' time. And, in the next house, Mme Brun was writing a long letter to her daughter, who had gone to the Tyrol for the winter sports.

“*I am beginning to suspect that Charlotte has a secret. It's too absurd for words! As our esteemed ancestor, Mme de Sévigné, might have written, it's something that outsoars one's wildest fancy. I really think, in fact I'm positive, that Charlotte is—in love!!*

“*But with whom? That's what I'm trying to discover. The trouble is, she's diabolically cunning. I've found her in tears a dozen times, and each time she has had the presence of mind to think up an explanation. . . .*”

“Now listen, Joseph,” Michel was saying to his employee. “If that fellow Baillet comes again, tell him it's absolutely impossible for me to see him.”

Though he did not voice his thought, it struck him that, in view of the perils of the situation, Joseph might well be given a weapon of some kind. But, “We'll see about that later,” he murmured to himself; then rang for the ledger-clerk, with whom he remained closeted for an hour, engrossed in work.

Baillet had two changes on his return journey, and it was quite dark when he reached La Rochelle. He had six hours in hand before going on duty again. He crossed the town on foot and, on reaching his cottage, fished the door-key out of the flower-pot in which he always hid it when he went out. No sooner had he opened the door than he saw at least a dozen copies of *The Laundry*, which had been pushed through the letter-box, strewing the floor. But these were only an overflow; the letter-box itself was full to the brim with copies of the paper.

No one actually saw him return, as all the neighbours were at

dinner. And a cyclist riding past the cottage noticed nothing unusual.

At the *Café de la Paix* on the Place d'Armes a game of *belote* had been dragging on for half an hour, and one of the players, a man who owned a wall-paper shop, remarked irritably as he drank off his third Pernod :

“Won’t this damned game ever finish? My missus will give me fair hell when I get back!”

Standing by, a napkin under his arm, the waiter was watching the game, only with great difficulty restraining himself from pointing out to the players their mistakes.

Two steam-trawlers, one flying the Donadieu House Flag, the other Varin’s, were exchanging blasts of their sirens, each trying to grab the fairway first.

At Paris, Martine was by herself in the bed-sitting-room, trying records (that she bought with a 30 per cent. discount because of the P.E.M.) on the gramophone. She was awaiting Philippe, who would be back at any moment . . .

Subsequently the medical experts were to fix the time it happened as, approximately, seven-thirty. So far, the only definite thing to go on was that the victim’s stomach was empty. But when did he usually dine? No one seemed to know. After his charwoman left, he had the villa to himself, and none of the neighbours could say much about his habits.

In fact, the police found them singularly unhelpful. Asked if they hadn’t heard the doctor’s bell ring, they looked blank. True, one old woman said, Yes, she’d heard a ring; but as she fixed the time at five or thereabouts, that didn’t advance matters.

The one established fact was that, during the time when most of the inhabitants of La Rochelle were dining, and the rain was abating, a scene of the utmost savagery had taken place in Dr Lambe’s hall.

In the hall, not in his consulting-room. His visitor hadn’t waited to be shown into it. The moment the front door closed behind him, he had struck the doctor, from behind most probably, with a heavy hammer. Thirty-one distinct hammer-blows could be counted, but there might have been more.

When the charwoman came at seven next morning, the hall was a shambles; fragments of brain spattered the walls. As it was a Sunday morning, the discovery attracted less attention locally than might have been expected; most people were at early Mass, or else enjoying a late morning in bed. And, in spite of the bad weather, a fair number of people had gone to the country for a day's shooting; amongst them the male folk of the Donadieu family.

Dr Lambe had always been unpopular—there was something sinister about him—but, though he died unregretted, no one could help being shocked by the brutality of his end.

Michel and Olsen heard the news at noon, when they came back to the Château at Esnandes. Baptiste, who accompanied them, kept casting surly glances at Michel, who had been shooting abominably, missing pheasants that had risen almost under his nose.

“Three rabbits, that’s the morning’s bag!” he announced scornfully to his wife, who was busy in the kitchen.

She had a message from the house for Michel.

“Madame Donadieu wants you to come back immediately.”

At first Michel supposed his mother was meant, and he had a qualm of fear. However, on questioning Mme Maclou, he learned that the call was from his wife.

They had the big blue car as usual. Olsen drove. Unknowing, they passed the cottage where Baillet lived.

He had not appeared for his turn of duty at the railway depot, and they had had to find a substitute. The train he should have driven left on time, but the railway officials thought it best to notify the police.

It was almost certainly on purpose that Frédéric had persuaded Mme Donadieu to have a game of chess with him in the ground-floor drawing-room. When she saw the men coming back, she merely remarked:

“I expect there wasn’t anything to shoot. The poachers have been very tiresome lately.”

At three o’clock Eva appeared in the doorway.

“Could you come up for a moment, Frédéric?”

“What is it?” There was a shade of anxiety in Mme Donadieu’s voice.

"Oh, nothing really. . . . Michel wants to have a word with Frédéric; that's all."

In the drawing-room upstairs Frédéric found the two men and Marthe awaiting him.

"What do you make of it? . . . You've heard what's happened?"

"About Doctor Lambe? Yes. The police are looking for that engine-driver, Baillet; he's not been seen since yesterday evening."

"It was he who did it, of course." Marthe put in emphatically.

"I expect so. That, anyhow, is what the Superintendent of the Central Police Station thinks. I had a talk with him this morning."

"Did he say anything about us? I mean, about my brother?"

"No. So far, your brother's out of it."

"What would you do, in our position?" This time it was Marthe who asked the question.

"I? Nothing."

Eva had taken on herself the task of keeping Mme Donadieu company downstairs and diverting her attention.

"People are beginning to talk about Martine," she was saying. "They're wondering what's the truth about her absence."

Soon after, there was a series of conversations, on one floor or another; sometimes by twos, sometimes by threes, and at least one all but complete gathering of the senior members of the family.

Meanwhile Kiki and his tutor were at a football final, on account of which there were barely a hundred people in the Alhambra picture-house that afternoon.

Nerves were so frayed that Marthe actually shed tears, while Michel shut himself up in his room, threatening to "go in off the deep end" if he wasn't left in peace.

"My view is"—Marthe had dried her tears and was speaking in her usual rather peremptory tone—"that it's high time for Martine to come back. We can't afford to leave any loophole for suspicion, considering how things stand with us."

And, oddly enough, it was Frédéric who demurred.

"But, really, I don't see what you can have against it." Marthe seemed quite annoyed. "Do you think Martine isn't a good enough match for Philippe?"

Frédéric gave way finally, when, at about eight, they were having a makeshift meal of sandwiches.

“Do you know his address? . . . Oh, of course you must do, as he writes to you.”

“I don’t know his address. But I’ll communicate with him.” And from the Donadieus’ he rang up the *Petit Parisien* office.

“Frédéric wishes to get in touch with Philippe.”

The “young couple,” as their friends called them, were dining with the Grindorges at a restaurant.

The police in all the area round La Rochelle were on the alert that night.

PART II: SAINT-RAPHAEL

I

IT always began at ten, and was as stereotyped as the behaviour of a type of maniac, well known to psychiatrists, who, having happened to experience on one occasion an erotic thrill such as he has never known before, returns at stated periods—as for an anniversary—to the same house of bought illusions, hoping to regain that first fine rapture, and insisting on the reproduction of all the circumstances, down to the least word or gesture, of that unique experience.

At ten in the evening the third and last rubber of bridge at the *Brasserie de l'Univers* was drawing to an end. Play had begun, as usual, immediately after dinner. Michel Donadieu always sat at two chairs' distance from the players, and, though he didn't know any of the four men, a curious relationship, subtler than that which follows on an introduction, had grown up between him and them.

One thing, for instance, that certainly interested the bridge-players—he was quite aware of this, and enjoyed their puzzled glances—was his performance with the powder-box.

Three of the players were elderly men, well-known figures at Saint-Raphael, one of them being the leading estate-agent, and they wasted no time on preliminaries, hardly pausing to greet each other before settling down round the table.

“Hurry up with our packs, Ernest,” one of them would shout to the waiter.

When the first game was under way, Michel came up and sat down at his usual place, watching the fall of the cards with an expert eye. When a hand had been played with special skill he would make a little gesture of appreciation, that the others had come to look for as a matter of course.

Yet he never exchanged a word with any of them. He always wore plus-fours of English cut and material, and his brown brogues,

which he cleaned himself, were always immaculate, whatever the weather or the time of day.

He waited till the clock struck nine before producing the powder-box. Then he gazed for a moment at his reflection in the mirror facing him, for it was a *café* in the traditional French style, with marble-topped tables, wall-sofas in imitation leather, and mirrors panelling the walls.

Delving with thumb and forefinger into the yellowish powder that filled the box, Michel took out a pill little larger than a pin's head, laid it on his tongue, and washed it down with a sip of Vichy water. A very simple ritual, on the face of it. But, for one thing, the pill contained no ordinary drug, but one that doctors prescribe rarely, and for no trivial complaint. It was digitalis. Then there was the box. Most people would have used the pill-box supplied by the chemist; not so Michel. For a while he had toyed with the idea of buying an antique silver comfit-box he had seen in the window of a curio-shop. Finally he had decided for the gold powder-box, which was at once daintier and more original.

For Michel was a sick man. Within five months he had grown inordinately fat, and his features, never particularly clean-cut, had become coarse and bloated.

When the big white wall-clock struck the hour of ten, he beckoned to the waiter and paid for his drinks, taking the money from a small pigskin purse. By then one had a good idea which players were going to win the final rubber.

The sea-front was empty at that hour, and the only sound was a murmur of small waves and leafage rustling in the warm Mediterranean breeze. Though the month was April, nights were so mild that one did not need an overcoat.

Saint-Raphael seemed deserted; shutters were closed in all the houses. As Michel walked away he knew the men in the *brasserie* were wondering where he could be going at this hour. And this knowledge did not displease him.

He took the second turning to the right; then, turning right again, entered a street parallel with the sea-front. In it a small *café* was still open; the *Provençal Bar*. It was a rather sordid little place, ill-lit and dingy, with a zinc-covered bar-counter and two

tables, and the staff consisted of an aged couple, the owner and his wife.

One wondered why anyone should wish to drink in such depressing surroundings; nevertheless, there were always two or three people lounging against the bar: railwaymen, hotel employees, and the like.

Michel, in his plus-fours, looked grotesquely out of place.

“My small Vichy, please.”

He had informed them that the Vichy they supplied was not authentic Vichy water, but came from a neighbouring spring.

“Very sorry, sir,” the landlord had replied. “But this is a small place, and we don’t have much choice.”

When Michel appeared, the other customers stopped talking and eyed him curiously. Sometimes he produced his powder-box, carefully selected a pill, then put it back again, murmuring to himself:

“No. No more tonight.”

He guessed that no sooner had he left than somebody would ask: “Who is it?”

Who, indeed, was he for these people: A rich, well-dressed man—a “toff,” as the old landlord would say—who came here every evening and, afterwards, waited for someone at the service door of the *Hôtel Continental*.

This, too, was a daily rite. He took his stand a hundred yards from the tavern. Some nights he wasn’t the only one waiting there; amongst others, the girl-friend of one of the kitchen staff was often to be seen pacing up and down, her high heels clicking on the pavement.

After some minutes Nina came running out, almost colliding with him in the darkness. He flung a protective arm round her shoulders, and pressed her to him for a moment.

“Not too tired, dear?”

“Not a bit. The hotel’s almost empty.”

Arm-in-arm, they walked the empty streets until a name in neon lights showed up in front; *À la Boule Rouge*. A muffled sound of music throbbed in the warm air as they went down a short flight of steps, and, when Michel drew back the red plush

curtain, the proprietor or the head-waiter—or both together—hurried forward to greet him with an obsequious “Good evening, Monsieur Emile.”

He smiled affably. They escorted him to his table. Then Nina said, “Excuse me,” and disappeared into the Toilet, to titivate.

A daily event and, indeed, quite an event for the little cabaret, which hardly paid its way, and where one never saw more than a few impecunious youngsters, a so-called “Spanish” dancer, and two girls, always the same pair, whose task it was to stay till two in the morning, dispensing glamour.

In fact, this nightly round, beginning with the hour of bridge-watching at the *brasserie*, and ending when Michel came back to the villa in the small hours, had replaced for him the genealogies and yo-yo of his nights at La Rochelle.

Wearing a thin black dress that he had bought for her, and which showed to advantage the lines of her young body, Nina came back and sat beside him. She still smelt of face-powder and the liquid soap provided in the Toilet.

Their corner was at the end of the room, a sort of alcove bathed in the rosy glow of a small table-lamp. Everyone knew what was expected; the band was getting ready to strike up a rumba, the proprietor signing to the two girls to hold themselves in readiness. The young men knew that they, too, were expected to play up and help to create an atmosphere of gaiety. When all were dancing, Michel, too, rose and did some steps with Nina, who was teaching him the rumba.

“Am I improving?”

“Yes, you’re getting on splendidly. You know, you’re awfully supple, and that’s the great thing, isn’t it?”

He wasn’t supple; merely flabby. He stole a glance at his reflection in the glass over the bar.

After a few turns he sat down again, his arm round the girl’s waist, and they had a whispered conversation.

“Needless to say,” he had told her, “Emile isn’t my real name. You mustn’t mind if I don’t tell you what it is.”

“You mean, you don’t trust me?”

“No, it’s not that at all. Only . . . I’m too well known.”

“What’s your job?”

She made a game of trying to guess his occupation.

“I know! You’re a celebrated writer. Or a journalist.”

He smiled, made an evasive gesture.

“Ah, if I could only tell you the story of my life, my poor little Nina!”

“Poor” indeed she was, little Nina Pacelli, whose father, a quarryman, was out of work oftener than not. Never, before Michel came on the scene, had she set foot in such a place as this, and at first she had demurred.

“Oh, I couldn’t go there dressed like this. It’s much too posh!”

“With me you can go anywhere.”

She hadn’t quite sized him up yet, but she had an inkling of the part he wanted her to play. She had already told him that she had five brothers and sisters and they had only two rooms between them.

“How many do you sleep in a room?”

“The two kids sleep with dad and me; the rest in the other room. It’s a fair squeeze, I can tell you!”

This seemed to please him; it was what he’d hoped to hear, apparently. Pointing to his tie-pin, she asked:

“Is that a real pearl?”

“Yes, of course.”

“It must have cost an awful lot.”

“Oh no. Only four or five thousand.”

The cabaret was upholstered in red plush, and overheated. One had an impression that it carried on solely for the benefit of Michel and Nina, and indeed Michel always scowled if the red curtain was drawn aside and some chance visitor dropped in.

Everyone knew that “the rich gent” was the protector of the little chambermaid, and out to give her a good time.

“I want you to tell me frankly, Nina,” he began.

“What?”

“What I asked you yesterday, and the day before.” His fingers were twitching, his cheeks slightly flushed.

The question he had asked her twice was:

“Have you ever . . . been with a man?”

At which she only smiled demurely.

“Why won’t you tell me?” he insisted.

“What difference can that make to you?”

She was seventeen, slim and lithe, but with an almost matronly bust that was out of keeping with the otherwise childish figure.

“Your fiancé has never . . . ?”

For she had confessed to him that she was engaged, and her young man was doing his military service at the Brest Arsenal.

“Ssh! That girl is listening.”

His senses were tingling, and he began fumbling with her dress. When he grew over-bold, Nina pushed his hand away, with a little laugh.

“Stop that! Behave yourself!”

“You might be nicer to me, dear. You would be, if you understood; if you knew the dreadful time I’d been having before I met you. I got into trouble over a woman. . . .” Something egged him on to play the risky game of half-confessions. “It was a near thing I didn’t get run in!”

“Gosh! What ever had you been up to?”

“I expect they’re still talking about me in—in a certain town in France. Yes, Nina, you really should be nicer. . . . And my health is in a terrible state. I’ve tachycardia; do you know what that is? All of a sudden my heart starts racing, like a motor-engine. Once I nearly passed out; they managed to slow it down only just in time. Just now it’s slow; under fifty, I should say. Feel my pulse. No, that’s not the place. . . . Here.”

She held his wrist docilely.

“Notice anything?”

“No.” Should she have said “Yes,” she wondered?

“My pulse is as weak as Napoleon’s. He had the same disease, you know. . . . Nina darling!”

“Yes?”

“Why won’t you answer my question?”

“What question?”

“You know quite well.”

“You *are* a silly!” She gave a nervous laugh. “Anyhow, you’re that ill, you shouldn’t excite yourself like this.”

There were times when he scared her. Especially in this red glow of the alcove, which made him look even grosser, more ogreish than ever. "Like a great fat slug!" she thought. And when his fingers started twitching, creeping over the thin black dress, she wanted to jump up and run away.

"Tell me you love me, Nina, just a little."

"You know I do."

"Then kiss me."

After a quick glance round the room, she dabbed her lips on his cheek.

"I can see you're thinking of something else," he grumbled.

"Don't be so absurd. . . . But it must be getting late."

Usually their departure was the signal for closing. The barman was showing signs of impatience, jingling the glasses on his counter.

"Good night, Monsieur Emile." The proprietor hurried forward obsequiously when he saw Michel stand up.

"Good night, Monsieur Emile," echoed the head-waiter.

And the cloak-room girl, with a gainful smile:

"Good night, Monsieur. Pleasant dreams!"

Now, they were standing in the empty street. There was a slight nip in the air.

"I wouldn't mind betting," Michel chuckled, "that they think we're going to—hm . . ."

"Oh, do keep quiet!"

He accompanied her as far as the railway bridge. She lived quite near—not more than a hundred yards away, judging by the time he heard her running and the sound of a door opening and closing. She always refused to let him come with her beyond the bridge; she was ashamed, he supposed, of letting him see the hovel where she lived.

"Good night, dear. You will answer my question tomorrow, won't you?"

"That depends. . . ."

"No. I want you to promise."

"Well—perhaps."

He had to cross Saint-Raphael from end to end on his way to the Villa des Tamaris, and he always dreaded the long, lonely walk

across the sleeping town, looked nervously round when he heard footfalls behind, and avoided dark patches, or crossed them almost at a run. It seemed hours before he came to the gate, walked through the garden and opened the door with his latchkey.

On this particular night, when still in the street, he saw a light in what had been the conservatory and now served as a morning-room, differing from the other rooms only in having glass on three sides.

The Villa des Tamaris had been rented by the Donadieus for three consecutive years in his father's lifetime, when Michel was ten or twelve. It was exactly as he remembered it in his youth, with its antique furniture and dingy brocade curtains; the only change was that the plants had been removed from the conservatory, which was now a long, narrow room that brought to mind an aquarium.

The idea had come from Marthe. When Michel had his heart-attack and the doctor advised a prolonged rest-cure, she had thought at once of the Villa des Tamaris. The attack had taken place three months previously, just after Dr Lambe's death. Michel had collapsed one afternoon when at work in his office. He was carried to the house, at the point of death, it seemed, and for hours the doctor had doubted if he would pull through.

Martine had come home the day before. Philippe was staying at the house and, to account for his presence, the engagement had been publicly announced. Oddly enough, Marthe, whom one would have expected to resent his intrusion into the family circle, had come to regard him as an ally.

"He should be kept out of the way as long as possible," Philippe remarked, referring to Michel.

A nursing-home had been suggested, but Michel wouldn't hear of it. Not that he minded being an invalid; indeed, it was rather a relief. But the mere name of a nursing-home terrified him; he was convinced he would never leave it alive.

"How about the pine-woods round Arcachon?" Mme Donadieu suggested. "I'm sure we could find a nice house there for him."

But the doctor had vetoed this; the Arcachon climate was too relaxing.

"The Mediterranean coast would be much more suitable."

Then Marthe remembered the villa at Saint-Raphael.

The days that followed had been nerve-racking for the Dona-dieus. Old Baillet had let himself be arrested tamely enough; more precisely, he had been found on the morning of the second day sleeping like a log in his cottage.

Eva had flatly refused to stay in the house.

"It's on account of Jean," she explained. "He keeps asking awkward questions about his daddy. You know what boys of five are like. I'm going away for a bit with Nanny and the children."

She left without even saying good-bye to her husband. Marthe was afraid to venture out; she had an impression that she'd be stared at in the streets.

Those five days were a nightmare. Even Olsen began to lose his nerve; for he was in terror lest his visit to the nursing-home at Bordeaux should be discovered. One morning Philippe tackled him.

"Where is she now?"

"At the *Hôtel de la Poste*, I suppose."

"Is she seriously ill?"

"I couldn't say."

"Ill or not, it's absolutely necessary for her to come back to her job at the office."

"But—"

"I'll go and see her."

The circumstances attending Philippe's arrival had been such that his presence seemed almost to be taken for granted. So much so that one night when they had sat up late, confabulating, he had slept on a sofa in the drawing-room.

As if the family hadn't anxieties enough on hand, Kiki chose this moment to have one of his "attacks."

"Michel had better take Kiki with him to Saint-Raphael," Marthe suggested.

It seemed a good idea. The lists, so to speak, had best be cleared; invalids and wounded removed to a safe distance. Michel, who had dreaded the idea of being left to his own

resources, welcomed the prospect of having the company of Kiki and his tutor.

“I did a long swim in the sea this morning,” wrote Kiki proudly to his mother, in mid-January.

One evening Philippe brought Odette back, and she resumed work at the office.

“An engagement is announced”—thus the local paper—“between Mlle Martine Donadieu and M. Philippe Dargens. Owing to the recent family bereavement, the wedding will be a very quiet one.”

After an expert glance at her sister's figure, Marthe had decided to ignore Martine completely. Mme Donadieu wept copiously, but her tears were no more than a suitable display of motherly feeling. Frédéric was seldom to be seen; there were rumours that the Alhambra might have to close down shortly.

Eva Donadieu was in Switzerland with her children, and a week before the wedding, which was fixed for mid-February, there came from her a telegram which served as pretext for a general review of family affairs. Eva asked for a telegraphic remittance to be sent at once as, in her haste to get away, she had left with only two or three thousand francs in hand.

It was Olsen who took the lead and asked Mme Donadieu, Marthe (as her brother's representative), and Philippe, to meet at his office.

“This is how things stand,” he began, watching the faces of the others to see how they would take it. “Each of the Donadieu heirs is manager of a department of the business and, as such, draws a salary of fifty thousand francs a year.”

While at Saint-Raphael Kiki was bathing in a warm sunlit sea, rain was falling steadily outside the windows of the offices on the Quai Vallin.

“As a consequence of his marriage, Philippe is entitled to a post of this order, and I propose that, for the present, he takes over Michel's department and draws the salary attached to it.”

Philippe's face was quite impassive. Marthe, who was observing him from the corner of her eye, was favourably impressed by the young man's calmness.

“Now, as regards our financial situation. . . . At the close of each

working year the profits are, of course, distributed amongst the shareholders; in other words, the members of the family. I think it best to let you know that for the last three years there have been *no profits*; our balance-sheet has shown a loss."

"I see," said Philippe quietly.

He had understood. He would have to make do with a relatively small income, fifty thousand francs a year. Also this accounted, in some measure, for the curious atmosphere prevailing in the big house in the Rue Réaumur—which had puzzled him for some time.

Two days later Marthe started another hare.

"It's out of the question that my sister should stay here, or even in La Rochelle, after the wedding. We don't want the whole town to know that she was two months gone when she got married."

Again Philippe agreed. Not once had he been heard to protest against what might be called a *Donadieu mandate*. And bearing in mind that they would have to live on fifty thousand francs a year, he suggested that Martine should join Michel and Kiki at Saint-Raphael. "They could share expenses," he pointed out.

Meanwhile Martine possessed her soul in patience. She saw little of Philippe, and when he talked to her it was almost always about practical matters. The arrangements for the wedding gave rise to heated family debates; Frédéric had declined to act as principal "witness" at the ceremony, and, deliberately, to defy public opinion, Varin and Camboulives were enlisted for this function.

Michel stayed at Saint-Raphael; it seemed wiser to give the impression that he was seriously ill.

The ceremony had little interest for Martine; only one thing caught her imagination: the astounding fact that it was her bedroom she shared with Philippe on their wedding night.

But something was weighing on her mind.

"Philippe dear, why shouldn't we go away together, you and I? We'd be ever so much happier anywhere else."

"We'll do that later on."

"When?"

"When the *Donadieu* finances have been straightened out. You understand, don't you?"

No, she couldn't understand why he should fall into the Donadieu ways so readily, be more of a Donadieu than herself; attending office at eight sharp every morning, and hurrying through lunch when he had a busy afternoon before him. Nor could she understand why he and Marthe got on so well together, or this affability towards Olsen.

"But I'll come to see you every other week-end when you're at Saint-Raphael," he promised her. "Once the trial's over, we'll see what can be done."

And he went on sleeping at the house, and having his meals with Mme Donadieu.

"Come in." Philippe opened the door of the "aquarium."

He had heard Michel's steps on the gravel path, then in the hall. Martine was sitting in an armchair, looking pale and tired.

"I've been waiting for you," Philippe continued, "for the last two hours. My train got in at half-past nine."

"Really?"

Michel, who was perspiring slightly, sank heavily into a chair. Some of the sandwiches that Martine had provided for Philippe's supper remained on a plate beside him, and Michel promptly reached out for one. His inability to set eyes on food without wanting to eat had grown even more pronounced since his illness, and every afternoon he spent a good deal of his time in the local teashops.

"We're leaving at six tomorrow morning."

"Eh? What's that? Whom do you mean by 'we'?"

"You and I, of course. . . . Martine, you'd better go to bed. Michel and I are going to have a little talk."

"You won't stay up too late?"

"Oh no. It'll only take ten minutes."

The ten minutes proved to be an hour. Philippe was in no mood for trifling, and several times rapped out a peremptory "Now listen, Michel!"

For, since his marriage, and indeed ever since he'd been invited to come back—after all, it was they who had summoned him—he

was calling all the Donadieus, his mother-in-law excepted, by their Christian names.

"I won't ask you how or where you've been spending the evening, but I must ask you to hear what I've to say. The case is coming up for trial three days hence."

Michel made a feeble bid for the young man's pity, putting on a woebegone air and fumbling in his powder-box for a pill.

"And what do you think will happen?" he asked miserably.

"That depends on how we go about it. Do you know Limaille?"

"The lawyer?"

"Yes. He's a nasty piece of work. I've had dealings with him. Well, it's Limaille who's defending Baillet."

"He'll do all he can to make things awkward for us, I'm afraid."

Limaille was a man of thirty who had started from nothing and, though working like a galley-slave, had failed to reap the success he thought himself entitled to. The truth was that nobody trusted him, and important cases never came his way. His practice was confined to the poorer sort of client and the shadier type of case.

"Well, I've had some talks with Limaille," Philippe said, lighting a cigarette.

He was dressed as in the past; had neither put on weight nor lost it. Yet he had changed considerably, above all in his bearing and expression. One could now see he was a young man very sure of himself—"cock-sure," detractors might have said; strong-willed, and somewhat arrogant.

"Limaille has withdrawn his plea for a medical examination."

"What medical examination?"

"Anyhow," Philippe went on, ignoring the question, "it was no concern of the trying judge. All he has to find out is when, how, and why Baillet killed Lambe. No complaint has been laid as regards the illegal operation."

"I don't quite follow. . . ."

"Surely it's simple enough. The Baillet-Lambe business is just an ordinary murder case. But suppose the trial were to be adjourned for further enquiry into the allegations regarding Odette's illness? And supposing Limaille persuaded the Court to take up both cases together? I could see that that was what Limaille was angling for;

he wanted the case to work up big, and shove himself into the lime-light. That was what he was after when he asked the examining magistrate to have enquiries made into the allegations published in *The Laundry*. He even talked of starting proceedings on behalf of his client."

Michel nearly had another heart-attack. He was picturing the excitement at La Rochelle, the police questioning the woman to whom he had sent Odette, then the doctor in charge of the nursing-home, then the manager of the *Hôtel de la Poste*. . . .

"But"—Philippe had been watching his face with amusement—"Limaille, you'll be glad to learn, has climbed down. I had a talk with him. As from September he's to be legal adviser to the Donadieu companies, with a handsome salary."

"I see. But, in that case, there's no reason for my going to La Rochelle."

It wasn't merely Nina that he was thinking, or of the sunlit ease of the Riviera. But he had a feeling that only here was he safe; at La Rochelle heaven alone knew what trouble was awaiting him.

"There is a reason," Philippe said. "Odette is being cited as a witness for the defence. I've no idea what sort of questions Limaille will put to her once she's in the witness-box. I don't trust the man altogether; he has the reputation of being a twister. And Odette is still feeling far from well; I'm in a position to know, as she is now my confidential clerk. It's absolutely essential for you to have a talk with her, and no later than tomorrow. And that's your job; I can't do it for you."

Unthinkingly Michel took another sandwich.

"I've done my best to prime her up," Philippe went on, "and I've been fairly successful. But there's always the risk she may lose her head when she's in the box and confronted with her father. She thinks you've forgotten all about her, and, for all I know, she may be feeling sore. I've done my best, I've told her that you're at death's door, and . . ."

"But suppose she won't listen to me?" Michel put in dolefully. He was clinging to his drab but carefree life at Saint-Raphael, to Nina, the little tavern, the cabaret, the bridge-players at the *bras-*

serie—to the safe routine of the new life he had organized for himself.

“An hour’s talk with her should be enough; then you can come back here. We’ll go into the details tomorrow, in the train. And now—good night. We have to make a very early start.”

They did not shake hands. Philippe tiptoed into his room and crept into bed as quietly as he could, thinking that Martine was asleep.

But then he heard a small voice beside him.

“Well? What plots have you two been hatching?”

“Never mind now, darling. Try to sleep.”

“No, I want you to tell me . . .”

“I’m trying to save your family from getting into a very nasty mess.”

A sleepy voice murmured:

“Very sweet of you, dear.” Suddenly she woke up completely, and clasped him in her arms. “But why should you bother about all that? We two could be so happy . . . anywhere together . . . away from all that lot!”

He kissed her, and gently freed himself.

“Don’t talk, please.”

“But I want to know. What can it matter to you if my brother . . .?”

“Please, Martine dear, do let me sleep. I’ll need to have all my wits about me tomorrow. It’s no easy job I’ve taken on, I can assure you. But once I’m through with it, we shall have a quiet life together. All I ask is for you to let me have a free hand for the next few days.”

She felt like weeping—why she hardly knew—but only sighed:

“Why?”

“Don’t ask. You’ll understand one day. . . . I’ve got to get up at five tomorrow.” And he settled into the position in which he always slept. There was a whisper in his ear:

“Philippe!”

“What is it?”

“Sure you’re not getting tired of me?”

“I love you more than ever.”

"Then why, why . . . ?" For days and days, in her exile at Saint-Raphael, she had been dreaming of those golden months at Paris. "Oh, Philippe dear," she sobbed, "let's go away together. Anywhere. I can't see why you . . . "

"Please don't talk, darling. I really must sleep."

He had a strenuous day, several such days, before him, and the sensation of a restless body pressing against him fretted his nerves. He changed his position again, saying sleepily :

" . . . night, Martine."

"Good night, dear."

Up to the last he was conscious that she stayed awake, lying on her back, gazing up into the darkness. And evidently sleep did not come to her till very late, for when, at five, he rose and dressed, she did not stir.

He went at once to Michel's room. Michel gave him an imploring glance, and moaned :

"I'm feeling rotten."

"Hurry up and dress. I'll get some coffee ready."

He went down to the kitchen. The rent of the villa being rather high, they had no servant, and made do with a charwoman, an Italian, who came at seven.

To her surprise, on entering the kitchen, she found the gas-stove still warm, some tepid coffee in the coffee-pot, and bread-crumbs on the kitchen table.

For a moment she wondered what had happened. Then, hearing movements in Kiki's room, she merely shrugged her shoulders—it was no concern of hers—and set about her work. As usual, she laid the table for four in the morning-room, ex-greenhouse.

II

At the station the taximan promptly asked Michel :

"Where to, sir? Quai Vallin or Rue Réaumur?"

It was Philippe who answered.

"To the Quai Vallin. As fast as you can."

For it was five o'clock, and the office closed at six. An hour

was short shrift for what had to be done. On the way from Saint-Raphael few words had passed between them; as ill luck would have it, they never had the carriage to themselves. Michel had read a detective story, while Philippe gazed out of the window.

When the taxi stopped at the Donadieu building, Michel dragged himself out sulkily, produced his purse with studied slowness—and left Philippe to pay the fare.

Following him in, he was quite startled at seeing the young man run up the stairs, four steps at a time, greet Joseph with a friendly wave of the hand, and push open a heavily padded door. Michel had been vaguely conscious that things had changed, but till now he had known by hearsay; seeing was another matter. And it was even more discomfiting when he saw Philippe pick up the letters on the table—letters addressed to Messrs Donadieu—and heard him call:

“Mademoiselle Odette! Please come!”

When she stepped out of her little office-room, he saw that she was dressed exactly as in the past.

“Would you please give Monsieur Michel a hand,” said Philippe, moving to the door, the sheaf of letters under his arm. “If anyone wants to see me, I’m in Monsieur Olsen’s office.”

So that was that! The rest lay with Michel. . . .

Forgetting that the girl had been through a long course of “priming up” by Philippe, Michel was prepared for the worst, now that they were alone together. He expected hard words, reproaches, or, at best, a flood of tears.

Nothing of the sort. Odette remained standing in front of his desk like a model employee waiting for orders.

“Shall I get my scribbling-block, Monsieur Michel?”

It suddenly struck him that she had changed; she looked more awake, and—what surprised him most—much more intelligent. Hitherto he had never thought of her as a young woman with a mind of her own; she had seemed to him a stolid, painstaking employee, if somewhat obstinate, as is often the case with those who have won certificates at training-schools.

She stood before him, waiting, and Michel, more and more

embarrassed, drew the little gold box from his pocket, and heaved a sigh.

“I’m a very sick man, my dear.”

He took out a tiny pill and swallowed it, making a grimace. Odette watched without any show of interest, then remarked:

“I’m ill too.”

“I know. We’re a pair of sick people—sick in mind and body, I’m afraid.” So far he had been feeling his way, hoping to find some opening for saying what had to be said. “Has Philippe told you what the doctor says: that I should have complete rest for some time?”

“Yes, he mentioned it.”

“And that any violent emotion might . . . be my death.”

“I know.”

Till now he had been playing a part, watching himself from the outside. Suddenly it flashed on him how grave was his position. That simply dressed young woman standing in the middle of his office, sometime Oscar Donadieu’s office, held them all in the hollow of her hand. Tomorrow, or the day after, when she was in the witness-box, a few words from her might bring the House of Donadieu to ruin; might get him sent to jail for heaven knew how many years. He bit his lip, then murmured brokenly:

“Odette!”

“Yes?”

“You can’t imagine what I’ve suffered, and how miserable I am now. I did a wicked thing, I admit it. I couldn’t resist the temptation of . . . of your youth, of everything about you.” Tears of almost sincere remorse had gathered in his eyes, and he buried his face in his hands. After a moment he looked up. “Believe me, I’d willingly give ten years of my life to atone, to make you well again. . . . Tell me the truth, Odette. Are you still very ill?”

“Yes.” She said it quietly, without a trace of emotion.

“Do you . . . do you suffer much?”

“What does that matter to you?”

“Odette, suppose I go down on my knees and beg you to forgive . . . ?”

“What good would that do?”

Was there a veiled menace in that question? Hardly knowing what he was doing, he sank on to his knees, stretching out his arms to her.

"Odette, I implore you to forgive me. Haven't we all suffered enough?"

"Please get up, Monsieur Donadieu."

"Not before you tell me—"

"Please get up. Somebody might come . . ."

He rose to his feet, stumbled across the room, and went on sobbing, his face to the wall. He had a feeling of helplessness; nothing he could do or say would influence her. She was implacable—and all was lost!

Typewriters were clicking in the other offices; somewhere a telephone was shrilling. A voice could be heard dictating a letter. Philippe was sitting on the corner of Olsen's desk.

"How does he seem?" asked Olsen anxiously.

"Just as he's always been, and always will be."

Olsen looked away. It wasn't the first time Philippe had made remarks in this vein about the Donadieus.

"And what was her attitude to him?"

"One of indifference, as far as I could judge."

They could only wait. They heard a faint thud overhead, no doubt when Michel went on his knees.

"How's your wife?" Olsen asked, to fill the silence.

"Quite well, thanks."

It was between the two brothers-in-law that relations were the coldest. Each seemed to be observing the other warily, trying to discover the joint in his armour. One day Marthe had asked her husband:

"Well, what do you think of him?"

"I think—he's better than I'd expected," Olsen replied, with a hint of reluctance, as who should, for truth's sake, give the devil his due.

"What does Michel find to do all day at Saint-Raphael?" Olsen asked.

Philippe made a vague gesture. He neither knew nor cared. He was listening for sounds in the room overhead. And some

moments later, as he could hear nothing, he ran up the stairs and, entering a small, unoccupied room adjoining Michel's, put his ear to the keyhole.

"... ask anything you like," he heard. "Needless to say, I make myself responsible for your future. You can stay on here, of course, as long as you choose."

"No," she said. "I'll leave the town once the case is over."

"Where will you go?"

"I haven't decided. Monsieur Philippe's promised me an allowance equal to what I'm earning now." Philippe grinned; he could picture the look on Michel's face when he heard this news. "And he's promised, too," the girl went on, "that if my father's sentenced to transportation he'll see that he escapes within two years at most."

"Quite so, you can count on us," said Michel firmly. "And now, what I'd like to have is your assurance that you'll hold out in Court, whatever pressure they bring to bear on you, and whatever questions you're asked."

"Yes, I shan't say anything."

"Then I can depend on you—absolutely?"

"I promised Monsieur Philippe, and I shall keep my word."

Philippe smiled to himself again. He had neither wept nor cajoled, but at some moment almost every day he had put aside his work and called the girl to his side.

"Well, Odette my dear, how are you feeling today? Let's have a look. You've been crying again, I can see. And all on account of that damned fool of a brother-in-law of mine! He isn't worth it."

He chaffed her, refused to take things tragically.

"I suppose you're going to tell me the usual sob-stuff about 'a young girl's honour,' and a ruined life, and all the rest of it?"

The first time she looked at him reproachfully.

"But it's no laughing matter for me, Monsieur Philippe. My life is ruined...."

"'Ruined'? Not a bit of it! For one thing, you're much prettier than you used to be. Yes, you are. Only look at yourself in that glass over the fireplace. There now; can't you see? And

in two or three months' time you'll be quite fit again. Then what's the point of crying over spilt milk, making yourself miserable for nothing?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"No point whatever. In fact . . . Look here! Suppose you and Michel hadn't . . . done what you did, or that there hadn't been any complications?" She was still dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief, and sobbing—but already less sincerely. "In that case you'd have kept your post with us as shorthand-typist, for years most likely. And you'd have developed into a dried-up old maid. You're the sort who gets like that, my dear, quite easily. Of course you might have found a husband; but then, again, you mightn't. Isn't that so?"

"At least I shouldn't have been a . . . a bad girl."

"That's not true!"

"What ever do you mean?"

"I mean that you weren't such an innocent little thing when my brother-in-law started in. Isn't that a fact?"

"Well, I once had a . . . a boy friend."

"Exactly. And now, thanks to what has happened, you're an interesting figure. You've gained experience, and had a romantic adventure like the heroine of a film. In a day or two everybody in town will be talking about you, and discover that you have 'glamour' as they'll call it. Michel will see you have a comfortable income, and you'll be able to lead a peaceful or an exciting life, as you choose. Really you're a very lucky girl, my dear."

It was amazing how readily she let herself be convinced. He could see she was drinking in his words, picturing the future he painted in such rosy colours.

"You'll have a husband—or, if you prefer, you can have a host of lovers."

"Don't be horrid! All men disgust me."

"That's nonsense. Take me, for instance; I don't disgust you, do I?"

She kept silent; Philippe was quite aware that Odette admired him, and that her feelings towards him were growing daily more ardent.

"I dare say you're worrying about your father. Of course it's rough on him, but let me ask you this. Was he ever a happy man? No. Well, now he's in prison . . ."

"Do you think that's nice for him?"

"It mayn't be very nice, but, given his temperament, I shouldn't say he feels it deeply. He'll be convicted; they'll send him to a penal colony. But we'll see he doesn't stay there long; with money one can always fix it up. And he, too, will be in a position to insist on my brother-in-law's providing for his future. He can settle down somewhere, and do nothing for the rest of his days, if he feels like it."

Several times he had succeeded in making her smile.

But now, at the interview with Michel, she wasn't smiling. Persistently he went the wrong way about it, protesting too much, indulging in self-pity, and trying to exonerate himself.

"Answer me frankly, Odette. Did I use any force to you? Wasn't it of your own free will that . . .?"

Somehow she couldn't help glancing towards the corner of the office where he had embraced her for the first time.

"And afterwards, when a baby was on the way, was it I who . . .?"

"Please stop!"

"I will—if you'll stop looking at me like that, as if you loathed me. I know I did wrong, but I'm paying for it now. My wife has left me; I'm like a stranger in my own house, I've had to go into hiding, and I'm dangerously ill, into the bargain."

A bell clanged in the lift-shaft; the offices were closing. Philippe opened the door and professed surprise at seeing Michel and Odette.

"Still here, you two? . . . Mademoiselle Odette, hasn't anyone rung me up?"

"No, Monsieur Philippe."

"Coming, Michel?"

Before going out, however, Philippe stepped over to the alcove where Odette was putting on her hat.

"Please say something to reassure him. For my sake."

She seemed to hesitate. But, on her way out, she paused for a moment when passing Michel on the landing, and said in a low tone :

“ You’ve nothing to fear from me.”

Eva was still in Switzerland with the children, so Michel dined with his mother and Philippe in the ground-floor flat. It struck him that Mme Donadieu had changed, though he couldn’t have said exactly how. And, seeing how Philippe behaved—as if he were quite at home here—he could not keep his eyes from straying now and again to the big portrait of his father on the wall.

“ Can she be depended on once she’s in the witness-box, Philippe ? ” Mme Donadieu enquired.

“ Absolutely. I was pretty sure before. But I thought it best for her to have a talk with Michel himself.”

Michel looked down ; that interview had left a detestable impression, that lingered like a bitter savour on his palate. And the changed atmosphere of the house added to his discomfort.

It seemed extraordinary, almost uncanny, that only a few months should have brought such changes. And he found himself picturing the dining-room as it had been during his absence, when his mother and Philippe had their meals here together.

There had been a sort of fatality about it, he decided, and no one had attempted to stem the course of events. So now Philippe was eating, chatting, quite at his ease in the family home ; while at Saint-Raphael Martine was soon to have a baby. . . .

“ I suppose you know, ” his mother said to him, “ about the plans we’re making for the coming winter.”

“ What plans ? ”

“ There’ll be another family in the house. So I shall move out to the lodge, with Kiki. Marthe, as the eldest of you, wants to have the ground floor, and Philippe and Martine will have the second-floor suite. You, of course, will stay where you were before.”

Sometimes from the way she looked at the two men one would have thought she was weighing them up, one against the other. After a long glance at Michel she said :

"I see you haven't changed. You eat just as much as ever—and just as fast."

Michel was an ugly eater. Not only did he take enormous helpings but he gobbled his food, no matter what it was.

"You've put on weight," his mother added.

"That's because of my heart. Having a slow pulse often has that effect, it seems; though it makes some people thin. Queer, isn't it?"

"How's Martine doing, Philippe?"

"Quite well, mother."

That "mother" was another shock for Michel. Yes, the old order had changed, with a vengeance! To his surprise, Marthe came down before their dinner was ended—which was contrary to all Donadieu etiquette.

"Finished your dinner already?" her mother asked.

"Yes. Jean's gone out."

And she drew a chair up to the table and started chatting with Philippe as if he were a well-established member of the family!

"Seen the lawyer again?" she enquired.

"Yes, it's all fixed up. He showed me the list of jurymen. With any luck the case should be got through at one sitting, and no awkward questions will be asked."

To her brother she said:

"You know the changes that are to be made—about the division of the house between us?"

"Yes."

"I wrote to Eva about it, but she hasn't answered. I suppose you know she keeps on asking us for money?"

He nodded vaguely. The curtains were drawn and the noises of the town were a mere distant murmur.

Meanwhile Mme Brun was confabulating with Charlotte.

"Michel's come back," she said. "Do you think he'll have the face to put in an appearance at the trial?"

"Not likely!"

"I wonder if he really knew what was going on...."

"What can that matter to you, anyhow?" For Charlotte had

grown surly to the point of rudeness. And she no longer showed any pleasure when Mme Brun proposed one of their pancake orgies. For Philippe's wedding she had sent a large—grotesquely large—bunch of flowers with a card cryptically inscribed : “*Best wishes, all the same. . . .*”

Mme Brun took Charlotte's retort placidly, and went on : “My own idea is that it was Michel, when he learned she was *enceinte*, who persuaded”

Charlotte stood up abruptly.

“I'm sick and tired of talking about those horrible people.” She walked towards the door. “Good night.”

“But it's only nine.”

“Perhaps it is, but I want to go to bed. Haven't I the right to go to bed if I feel like it ?”

Left to herself, Mme Brun fell back on writing a long letter to her daughter. “*Michel has abruptly returned from the Riviera where he was doing a rest-cure. In my opinion that means*”

Marthe was asking her brother :

“When are you going back ?”

Philippe answered for him.

“Tomorrow morning.”

Though none of the Donadieus attended the trial, it was just as if they all were in the court-room, in flesh and blood. Somehow one felt their presence—behind each word spoken, each question put to a witness ; even on the judge's bench. As chance would have it, there was a break that morning in the long spell of bad weather ; the sun came out, the air was as bright and warm as that of a spring day.

The most prominent figure at the trial was Limaille, the lawyer, and he was watched with eager interest as he bustled up and down the corridors, the wide sleeves of his gown flapping like a huge crow's wings. What would he have to say ? Was he about to make a frontal attack on the stronghold of the Quai Vallin ?

There was surprise, not to say disappointment, when the prisoner was marched in, escorted by two warders. He cut an insignificant figure and looked anything but the ferocious ruffian they had

expected to see. He was in his Sunday best, and with his white shirt and cuffs, and ready-made tie, looked like a peasant dressed up for a country wedding, or for a funeral. Nor did he seem agitated; only when one observed him closely did one see a hint of panic in his eyes.

It was still worse when he was being examined by the judge. He seemed to wonder if it was to him that the questions were addressed, and kept looking round at his warders, as if asking them to help him out, while his counsel whispered instructions in his ear. Now and then he braced himself to answer:

“Yes, your honour. . . . No, your honour.”

He felt the lack of his railwayman’s cap, which he could have twiddled, to keep himself in countenance. As it was, he didn’t seem to know what to do with his hands.

“Did you strike Doctor Lambe with this implement?”

“Yes, your honour.”

“And you dealt your victim no less than thirty-one blows with it. Is that so?”

There were the usual exclamations of horror from the public.

“Yes, your honour.”

The judge looked up severely. “Silence in the Court!”

At certain moments one might have taken the calmness of the prisoner as proof of callousness. But generally it was obvious that this was not the case, and even the judge seemed to have little heart for questioning him. The man in the dock was a poor devil of limited intelligence, there was nothing to be got out of him. Indeed, the only remarkable feature of the case was that a man so meek and insignificant should have worked himself up to the point of murder.

“Next witness.”

The court-room was crowded now, and everyone craned his neck towards the witness-box.

Slowly Odette came forward. So unselfconscious was her manner that she might have been entering her employer’s office, memorandum-block in hand, to take down a letter.

“As daughter of the accused, you are not required to give your evidence on oath, but you are none the less obliged to state the

truth and nothing but the truth. . . . My first question is this. Were you aware of your father's intention to commit murder?"

Odette answered in a low tone, her eyes fixed on the judge, and someone at the back of the Court cried, "Louder!"

"Speak up," the judge said. "And please turn towards the jury when you answer. . . . When your father came to visit you at Bordeaux, did either of you mention the article in *The Laundry*?"

"No, sir."

"Were you not surprised at your father's coming to see you?"

"I really couldn't say. . . . I forgot."

There were still cries of "Louder!" from the back. Odette swung round towards the interruptors, and gave them a scathing look.

"Had you read the article in question when your father came to see you?"

Her answer was inaudible, but everyone saw her shake her head.

"Now that you have read the article, will you kindly inform the Court if the statements made in it are true?"

Meanwhile Baillet seemed plunged in a sort of stupor, cowed perhaps by the pomp and circumstance of the Law, the robes and ritual, and the sight of all these people staring at him as if he were some strange, dangerous animal.

"No, sir," said Odette firmly.

"You understand my question? The Court is not concerned with references to other parties, which are irrelevant to the present proceedings. What I ask is whether the allegations relating to yourself are true."

"They are not true."

"Am I to take it that none of them is true?"

"Yes, sir."

"You never ceased working for the firm employing you, even for a few days?"

"No, sir."

"And you went to Bordeaux under instructions from your employers, in the ordinary course of your duties?"

"Yes, sir."

The judge turned to the Public Prosecutor, then to the jury; finally his eyes settled on Maître Limaille.

"Has anyone any further question to put to this witness?" he asked, following it up quickly with "Thank you, Mademoiselle. You can stand down."

And that was all. One was conscious of a change in the atmosphere of the crowded court-room, of a general sigh of relief—or regret, from those who had been hoping for sensational disclosures. Still, it had been a near thing; one word more, and a leading family of La Rochelle would have been humbled to the dust.

"Next witness."

A railwayman stepped into the box, one of a series of witnesses to testify that Baillet bore an excellent character and was the mildest of men.

In answer to questions by counsel for the defence, a medical witness said :

"After a careful study of Baillet's mental state I am convinced that he was not wholly responsible for his acts that evening." This was perhaps the most distressing part of the evidence, for the doctor, after his patient had released him from his obligation to secrecy, went on to state that Baillet had suffered in early life from a specific disease that had permanently impaired his constitution.

There were yawns amongst the public, who had expected something spicier. Instead, they had to listen to a series of dull, mildly sordid depositions.

"The Court will now hear counsel for the defence."

But Limaille was as disappointing as the witnesses. He spoke briefly and to the point; in fact, his speech was a model of decorum.

"Try, gentlemen of the jury, to put yourselves in the place of my unfortunate client. Suppose a scurrilous rag were to publish a grossly offensive article defaming the wife or daughter of any one of you. . . . For political reasons the deceased sought to sully the good name of one of the most respected families of our city, and, as an indirect consequence, a decent working man, with thirty years of loyal service to his credit, now stands before you in the prisoner's dock."

This colourless allusion was the only reference to the Donadieus. The rest of the speech was an appeal for sympathy with Baillet—which was superfluous; one had only to look at the wretched man to feel sorry for him.

And when counsel for the prosecution addressed the jury no one was much surprised to hear him add:

“While looking to you for a verdict of ‘Guilty’ on the charge of manslaughter, I see no reason why you should not give him the benefit of extenuating circumstances.”

Philippe was in his office with Mme Donadieu and Olsen, and none of them had much to say. For all Philippe’s assurances that everything would go well, they couldn’t help feeling uneasy. The telephone-bell shrilled, but it was only Michel ringing up from Saint-Raphael.

“No, nothing yet,” Philippe replied. “I’ll call you when it’s over.”

Just then, by chance apparently, Frédéric strolled in. He had been to the court-house and found its atmosphere so depressing that, seeing his face, they feared he was the bearer of bad news.

“Acquitted!” was all he said.

His eyes were fixed, not on Philippe but on Mme Donadieu. He was perspiring slightly, and dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief before taking out his cigarette-case.

“Acquitted!” Olsen echoed. “Well, I’m damned!”

And then a curious thing happened. All four couldn’t help glancing nervously towards the door, as if they expected to see a menacing form loom up on the threshold, Baillet on the warpath!

“What did he say?”

“Nothing. In fact, he didn’t seem to understand the verdict. Then Limaille went and fetched his daughter. She burst into tears and flung herself into her father’s arms.” From Frédéric’s tone one could tell that he had been deeply moved.

“How did the public take it?” Philippe asked.

His father frowned slightly, as if thinking, “That’s the only thing that interests you, my boy!” Then he turned to his son.

“The public? They were completely taken by surprise, as far as I could judge. There was quite a sensation, in fact. A lawyer

standing next to me said to a man beside him, 'A neat piece of work, eh ?'"

"And so it was!" smiled Philippe.

There wasn't open war between father and son, but one felt that they lived in different worlds. Whose the fault was, would have been hard to determine, though Frédéric's attitude of mistrust towards the young man might well account for it, at least in part.

The Donadieus, however, had all come round to a favourable view of Philippe; indeed, Mme Donadieu sometimes seemed to have more confidence in him than in her own children.

Marthe, if still a shade aloof, was grateful to Philippe for having kept his head and piloted the family so skilfully through its troubles.

Olsen, too, was forced to admit that in business matters Philippe was his equal, and vastly superior to Michel. But, like Frédéric, though for other reasons, he couldn't overcome his mistrust of the young man. Asked to sum up his feelings, he might have said: "I'm wondering—what's his game?"

For there was something almost uncanny about the readiness with which Philippe had adapted himself no less to the Donadieu ways than to the exigencies of the business. What was he aiming at? Was he the sort of man to be content with being merely one of the Donadieu heirs? He never even hinted at a desire to have his salary of fifty thousand francs increased, and he regularly paid his share of the rent of the Saint-Raphael villa. Nor did he ever make a decision without first consulting Mme Donadieu and his brother-in-law.

Even in such details as the lighting of his office—which was quite inadequate—he made no attempt to break with precedent. He could easily have had a better lamp installed, but refrained from doing so.

"Now that it's over," said Mme Donadieu, "how about the future? We'd better come to some arrangement—about our holidays, for instance—hadn't we?" Without thinking, she looked to Philippe for the answer.

"There's no need for any immediate change that I can see. Michel had better stay on the Riviera all the summer. We can

go there for our holidays, in succession. When it's my turn I'll take Odette with me as my secretary; everyone will find that quite natural. Then Michel will settle on her the lump sum he's promised, and she need never come back to La Rochelle."

"How about her father?"

An unpleasant reminder. They'd provided for every contingency except his being acquitted. What were they to say to Baillet, and what line would he take?

Just then there were footsteps on the stairs. Without waiting to be shown in, someone knocked at the door and entered quickly. Philippe was the first to look round, and he could not repress a slight start when he saw Odette walk calmly past them to her office, taking off her hat.

Fearing Mme Donadieu might make some remark, he said hastily:

"Look here, if you'll excuse me, I'll get on with my work." He pointed to the correspondence on his desk.

"Will you ring up Michel?" asked Olsen, but Philippe scowled him into silence, and shepherded them all to the door, his father included.

When he had closed the door behind them he saw the girl standing beside the desk, a faint smile on her lips. She was swaying slightly, as if labouring under some emotion.

"Well, Odette, my dear . . ." he began.

She made an effort to appear composed, and said shyly:

"Were you satisfied with me, Monsieur Philippe?"

He realized that they were on the brink of an emotional scene—he was almost as moved as she was!—and that it must not be allowed to mature. He walked across the room to the window and flung it open.

"Well, was I mistaken when I said we'd fix things up all right?" he asked cheerfully.

She gazed at him enquiringly, as if wanting him to be more explicit.

"And now," he hastened to add, "I'll ask you to carry on as usual for the next few months. When I go South in the summer, I want you to come with me."

"Will you be working any more today?" She picked up her memorandum-block.

"No. . . . I'll only ask you to call up Saint-Raphael."

She did so—reluctantly, as he guessed; but he judged it necessary to ask this of her.

"Thanks, Odette. Now you'd better go to your father."

"Oh, some friends of his have taken him off with them," she said rather scornfully. "I don't know where they've gone. To some pub, I expect."

Philippe could picture the railwayman and his mates drinking themselves fuddled in some low tavern.

"Hullo? That you, Michel." He signed to Odette to leave the room, and made a speaking-trumpet of his hand. "Can you hear me? Good! All's well. He's acquitted. Yes? . . . I tell you it's quite all right. . . . No, there's nothing to worry about. I'll write this evening."

Odette, who was on the landing, heard the click of the receiver as he hung up. She went back to her office to get her hat, moving with a slowness that showed her reluctance to go without hearing the words she was awaiting. Her hand on the door-knob, she looked wistfully at the young man.

"Good night, Monsieur Philippe."

"Good night, Odette." He would not meet her eyes.

When the door had closed behind her, he heaved a sigh of relief.

III

So cumbrous was the door-key that there was no question of carrying it about with one. And neither Baillet, though he prided himself on his carpentry—the elaborate hen-coop in the back garden, for instance, was his handiwork—nor his daughter, for all her resourcefulness, had ever thought of fitting a new lock on the front door.

Before it happened (before, that is to say, the railwayman's arrest) there was only one key in existence, and it was always kept in a cracked flower-pot standing on the window-sill to the left of

the door. This hiding-place was so little of a secret that on one occasion when Baillet and his daughter were out and the chimney caught fire, the neighbours promptly showed the firemen where to get the key.

While her father was in custody Odette had continued leaving the key in the flower-pot, for lack of anywhere else to put it, and when she saw him going off with his friends to celebrate, after the verdict, it never occurred to her to whisper to him :

“You’ll find the key in the usual place.”

Night was falling and it was turning chilly when she entered the quiet street where was her father’s cottage. Most of the houses were of the same humble type as Baillet’s, with small gardens in front and behind, and the road was lighted not by street-lamps but by arc-lamps strung out at long intervals above the road.

As Odette opened the gate she noticed that no light was showing in the front room, and with a gesture that had become automatic —she had been making it since she was quite small and had to climb on to an empty box, kept near the window for her use—she plunged her hand into the flower-pot. She had quite a shock on finding nothing in it, and took it down, just to make sure.

After that she knocked at the door, on the off-chance, though she was fairly sure that, were her father in, there would have been a light showing, as the shutters did not close completely. She was dead tired. After a moment she went back to the road; she had a clear view in both directions; no one was in sight.

Of course it was an exceptional day; one could draw no conclusions from a detail of this sort. Quite possibly her father had been home and, without thinking, put the key in his pocket when he left.

Her clothes were too thin for the cold night air, so she did as she had sometimes done when she was little; walked round the house, climbed on to the kennel—its last occupant had been dead ten years—and scrambled in through a window that could be opened from outside, as the latch was missing. The room into which she stepped was a small scullery, leading into the kitchen.

Nervously she fumbled for the light-switch; it seemed to her that there was something queer about the atmosphere. Still, she

could see nothing abnormal; the kitchen was not particularly untidy, though the cupboard door stood open and there were some crumbs on the oilcloth.

What struck her most was the unusual smell. Where could it come from? Opening a door, she entered what they called the parlour, though actually it was furnished as a dining-room. It was a room that was never used except when visitors came, and smelt of damp and beeswax.

Now, when Odette turned on the light, she discovered that the air was thick with smoke. And then she understood. The lace squares and ornaments had been shifted from the table, and in their place was an array of glasses, the best ones, from the service. A box of cigars, reserved for visitors, lay open, and the air reeked of cigar-smoke, brandy, and men's sweat.

Without stopping to think, she hung up her coat and hat, took an apron from a peg, went back to the kitchen and put a kettle to boil on the gas-ring. Then she opened every window, as the smell in the house was making her feel sick.

Obviously her father had been entertaining his cronies here. That was natural enough, but really he shouldn't have used the best glasses, or left them standing on the polished table, making rings all over it. After washing the glasses and putting them back on their shelf, she wiped the table and, as some of the spots wouldn't come off, went over them with furniture polish.

She wasn't hungry, but dropping with fatigue, and after finishing with the table, sank into an armchair. For some minutes she let her gaze roam round the room, lingering on the framed photographs on the walls; then, with a little sigh, she closed her eyes.

But she remained conscious of the lapse of time, and heard the last 'bus from Charron go by, and presently the Paris train. After half an hour or so there was a sound of heavy footsteps outside, a key rattling the lock. Before opening her eyes she became aware that the person at the door was having trouble in opening it, and had a moment of panic. Suppose it wasn't her father!

She rose to her feet, yawning, and made sure the room was tidy, while footsteps sounded in the hall. She had got back her nerve, and it was she who opened the parlour door. And then she was

really terrified, terrified of the man who loomed up in the shadows. It was her father—but he was changed out of recognition.

He was still in his best suit, the one he had worn at the trial. But now his lips were tight, his jaw thrust forward aggressively, and his eyes had a queer glitter that she had never seen in them before. Suddenly he barked out:

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Odette almost burst into tears. She’d understood. Only twice in her life had she seen her father drunk, but she had a very vivid memory of both occasions, especially the one following her mother’s funeral.

“What is it, dad?” she asked timidly.

He grinned. And, as grinning wasn’t his way, it made him look still more alarming.

“Clear out!” he bawled, steadyng himself against the doorpost.

For a moment she fancied she had misunderstood, and waited, keeping quite still. Then, in the tone of a man who is holding himself in for the while, but cannot answer for what he will do next, he repeated:

“Will you kindly clear out!”

And now she realized he wasn’t drunk in the same way as before. One could see that his nerves were strung to breaking-point; there was a strange fixity in his eyes and his features were rigid, as if he were controlling them by a tremendous effort of will.

“Please, dad, listen! I . . .”

“Ain’t I told you to clear out of this, you bitch? I’m through with you. And you know bloody well why.”

Suddenly he seemed to lose control, and burst into tears, shaking convulsively from head to foot. Odette was scared out of her wits.

“All right, dad, I’ll go. But don’t take on so. Please listen . . .”

“Shut your mouth!”

“But I want to . . . to explain.”

“And I don’t want to hear no more of your lies, my girl. Now then, get a move on! Can’t you see it’s all I can do to keep myself from serving you as I served that blasted doctor?”

She started to go to her bedroom, with the idea of spending

the night there, after barricading herself in. Perhaps in the morning her father would be in a calmer frame of mind.

But then he took a step towards her, snarling : "Get on with it !" Tears were still rolling down his cheeks. "Take what you want, but get out of this house *at once*!"

To her surprise, he walked into her bedroom and switched on the light. Then she saw him hauling down a suitcase, the only one they had, from the top of the wardrobe.

Odette seemed paralysed ; she couldn't get a word out, or even shed a tear. Her body had gone slack, and, propped against the bedpost, she watched her father's activities with bewildered eyes.

Clumsily, with the jerky movements of a drunkard, he opened the wardrobe door, wrenched off their hooks the clothes that hung inside, and bundled them into the suitcase.

"Well ? Why don't you give a hand ? I guess you think I'm tight. Well, I may have had a drop or two, but I know what I'm about all right, and don't you run away with the idea that I'll have changed my mind tomorrow morning."

There was something tragic in his grief, tragic and grotesque at once. Those who had seen him that morning, in the dock, an insignificant little wisp of a man, dazed and pitiful, would not have dreamt him capable of such intensity of emotion.

"For God's sake, hurry up !" There was almost a note of pleading in his voice. "Don't you understand ? No ? Well, if you must know, that dirty swine of a lawyer, that . . . Limaille, had the face to come and offer me *their* money, the same as they're giving you. I could hardly keep my hands off the bastard's throat !"

His voice broke on a sob, and a fit of dizziness came over him. For a moment Odette thought he was going to fall unconscious. But then another spasm of rage convulsed him and, losing all self-control, he started screaming :

"Go away, you bitch ! Go away ! Go away !"

Feverishly he fumbled in his pockets, produced a small red card and held it under her eyes. It was a member's card of the Communist Party ; a brand-new one, issued that afternoon.

"Got it ? Now do you understand ?"

For to him that slip of pasteboard was the symbol of his revolt, of his break with all that his life had stood for till today.

He stumbled back against the wall, on the brink of collapse, and with vacant eyes watched his daughter slowly moving towards her hat and coat. In a last access of energy he picked up the suitcase and flung it in front of her.

“Don’t forget your things.”

Odette made a final effort.

“Listen, dad!” she began. “I assure you . . .”

But she could see he wasn’t listening; he was nursing his grief, working himself up for another outburst. As she opened the front door she heard a queer, blurred sound behind her—was it a snarl of rage, a hiccup, or a sob?—and then she started running down the road, the suitcase slapping against her leg at every step.

She slowed down only on reaching the Porte Royale. Two young corporals on their way back to barracks stared at her, and made some facetious remark. Though not particularly heavy, the suitcase was awkward to carry. There were still some people about, coming from the centre of the town; the show at the Alhambra had just ended.

For some minutes Odette lost her bearings, but presently she saw the Town Clock just in front, and discovered that it was after midnight. Beyond the Clock Tower lay the harbour, where the tide was near the full, masts of fishing-boats rising higher than the housetops. On the water-front a *café* was still open, the *Café de Paris*, where she sometimes went on a Sunday afternoon to listen to the music.

In a sort of dream she walked to one of the tables and sat down on the wall-sofa behind it. When a waiter came, she stared at him for some moments, trying to realize where she was.

“What can I get you, Mademoiselle?”

“I don’t know. . . . Oh, yes; a cup of coffee.”

Some time passed before she noticed that the *café* was on the point of closing, most of the chairs stacked on tables and half the room in darkness. She could hear two half-drunk young men, who were sitting near the bar, exchanging confidences at the top of their voices.

"So I says to her, 'If you think you can play that sort of game on me, my pet, I tell you straight, there's nothing doing.'"

"Good for you! That's the way to talk to 'em."

Odette's eyes settled on a man she recognized—indeed she had seen him only that afternoon—but for some reason she couldn't recall who he was. He had greying hair and was sitting beside a rather shabbily dressed woman of the chorus-girl type. He, too, looked at her, and there was a curious intentness in his gaze.

A moment later she saw him bend towards the woman at his side, say something to her as if to excuse himself, and start walking across the sawdust-strewn floor in her direction. As he approached, Odette was still racking her brain to remember who he was.

There was something so strange about it all that she half wondered if she was dreaming. She could still hear the two young bloods discoursing loudly of their love-affairs.

The grey-haired man bowed to her gravely, saying in a low voice:

"May I sit down beside you for a bit, Mademoiselle Odette?" Then, seeing she hadn't recognized him, he added: "I'm Frédéric Dargens, Philippe's father."

She nodded, guessing that he had noticed the suitcase and was puzzled by it. When the waiter was coming back with the coffee, he murmured:

"Might I suggest you shouldn't drink coffee just now?" Turning to the waiter, he said: "Bring a hot grog."

She made no protest. Indeed, she felt vaguely drawn to this man who obviously knew life well and handled things so tactfully.

"So you missed the train?" he smiled, glancing at the suitcase.

She felt like bursting into tears, but fought them down. When he gently patted her arm, she found something consoling in his touch.

"There isn't another train till five in the morning. . . . You couldn't stay here all night, of course."

One felt that he was choosing his words carefully, and they were intended to convey more than their obvious meanings.

Abruptly she came out with it, and Odette could hardly believe it was she who was speaking. She had never been one for con-

fiding in her friends, and at the office had a reputation of being "stand-offish." And now she heard herself saying :

"My father's just turned me out of the house!"

"I guessed as much when I saw that suitcase."

She didn't stop to wonder how he could have guessed what, for her, had been a complete surprise. Already she felt at ease with him, and, after a look at the woman sitting opposite them, said fretfully :

"Why does she keep on staring at me like that?"

Frédéric murmured an excuse, rose and whispered something to the woman. Shrugging her shoulders, she picked up her bag and shabby fur coat, and walked out.

"I told her to go to bed," Frédéric explained with a smile.

"Why?"

"Because we must have a little talk. You can't roam the streets all night, obviously. For one thing, you might be seen, and that wouldn't help matters. . . ."

She made a gesture of indifference.

"Now then!" said Frédéric with mock severity. "Don't be childish! Try to see things in their proper light. . . . But I wish you'd drink that grog."

"It's too hot."

"That's no matter. Drink it."

The young men sitting near the bar were watching them. The woman at the cash-desk and the waiter, used to Frédéric's late hours, had an air of patient resignation.

"First of all, I'll ask you to remember this: nothing in life is final—least of all its tragedies."

She found his voice soothing; it resembled Philippe's, but was at once warmer and more gentle. Also his "Don't be childish!" had reminded her of Philippe, who had the same way of regarding others as children, and taking them under his protection. What was it Philippe had said to her? "It's absurd to think your life is ended. On the contrary, it's just beginning."

How easily she had let herself be convinced by Philippe—she, whose father had killed a man on her account; she, who was known to all the townspeople as her employer's mistress, a girl

who had undergone a clandestine operation; whose good name was lost for ever!

Now Philippe's father was assuring her that "nothing in life is final," and indeed she was bound to admit that the details of the tragic scene she had just had with her father were already growing dim. Later, perhaps, she would recall them vividly, but for the moment they were like something she had read in a book, or dreamed.

The room seemed very hot and she unbuttoned the collar of her coat. After finishing her grog she could feel the blood coursing in her veins, her temples throbbing. The voice beside her asked:

"Do you love Michel Donadieu?"

She promptly shook her head; then blushed, remembering. . . . It was less definite than an emotion, but somehow she couldn't help thinking of Philippe, of the times when he used to call her to his side, not to dictate the mail, but to talk to her about her personal problems.

What was it he'd told her once, half laughingly, half in earnest? That she'd acquired "glamour." That she'd had a romantic adventure, "like the heroine of a film." There were many other things he had said in this vein, but, try as she might, she couldn't remember them—anyhow, not the exact words. It was more his tone, his manner, that lingered in her memory.

Really, of course, it came to this: he was urging her to become cynical ("It's best to be 'hard-boiled'!"), to keep her end up ruthlessly in the *mélée*, and to cease being one of the "victims."

What he'd said was more or less this:

"In the world of nature there are animals that eat others, and animals which seem born to be eaten; wolves and rabbits. Don't be a rabbit!"

Frédéric, she guessed, was not so hard. Perhaps, indeed, what he meant was something very different.

"As chance would have it, you've not been able to lead the sheltered, regular life you seemed cut out for. So you'll have to make do with another. See what I mean, Odette?"

She nodded, and dabbed her forehead with her handkerchief; she was perspiring slightly after the pungent grog.

"And, anyhow, you're in a better position now for facing life, aren't you?"

"I'm not well yet," she said sadly.

"I know. . . . But suppose I tell you that fifty per cent. of the women I know have been through what you've been through?"

"Is that really so?"

"What did Michel say to you, the day before yesterday?"

"He wanted me to go to the Riviera later on, with Monsieur Philippe—for appearance' sake, he said. I was to work there for a week, then they'd settle money on me, or give me a monthly allowance, and I could go. . . ."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"And what have you decided to do?"

"I haven't decided anything, not yet."

At last the noisy young men left the *café*. The waiter promptly seized the chairs they had been using and stacked them on the table.

"What would you advise me to do?"

Frédéric hardly felt justified in advising her to reject Michel's offer. He had no idea how far Odette was capable of fending for herself. So he replied vaguely :

"I advise you to . . . live your own life. By the way, have you any money with you?"

"I really don't know."

Then she remembered a gesture of her father; after bundling her clothes into the suitcase, he had thrown in something else as well, something that looked like the old leather wallet in which she and he kept their savings.

"Shall I have a look?"

She dreaded being left alone. With nervous haste she opened the imitation-leather suitcase, fumbled amongst the crumpled mass of garments, found the wallet—it had been one of Baillet's few wedding-presents—and opened it.

"Yes, my seven thousand francs are here," she said. "What do you think I should do?"

She had a queer impression that it was Philippe who would answer her, through his father's lips.

"The first thing to do is to get out of this *café*. It's long past closing-time, and they want us to go. After that, we'll see."

For a moment she fancied he had an ulterior motive. After paying for the drinks he picked up the suitcase, and for the first time in her life she had a door held open for her to pass, by a smiling, elegantly dressed man.

It was a moonlight night, the air was dry and crisp. As they walked along the water-front, Frédéric was wondering what to do.

"Of course, you might spend the night at an hotel," he said at last, linking her arm in his with an easy, protective gesture. "But everyone in the town would hear about it tomorrow, and it would give rise to gossip. The train doesn't leave till five past seven."

"What train?"

"Does that really matter? The great thing, in my opinion, is for you to leave La Rochelle and have a good long rest. Then you'll be able to make plans and decide where to go; to Paris, for instance, or some quiet country town, if you prefer it."

She decided quickly. "I'll go to Paris."

"Now listen, please. What I'm going to suggest may compromise you, though there isn't much risk, really. If you weren't so tired I'd advise you to walk about the town till your train goes. As it is . . . Look here, I'll leave the door of the cinema ajar, and you can make yourself snug in one of the dress-circle boxes. I'll see you get away at five."

He did not trouble to listen to her answer; he knew she was prepared to do anything he asked. After lining up three well-padded chairs at the back of a box, near which was a radiator, he watched her settle down on this makeshift couch and close her eyes.

In his little room on the top floor he found the woman who had been with him at the *café*—an acrobat past her prime, who was now out of a job.

"Who was that girl?" she asked.

"Nobody you'd know."

"Well, I'd never have thought it of you—leading young girls

astray, at your time of life! She's young enough to be your daughter."

He turned it off with a laugh.

"That's a sign of age, my dear—didn't you know it? Old chaps always want them young!"

At Saint-Raphael, at the same hour, Michel was leaving the *Boule Rouge* with Nina on his arm. He was really exhausted after his journey, but he exaggerated, tottering like a man on the brink of collapse. Now and again he would halt with a faint gasp, and press his hand to his chest dramatically.

"Another evening gone, and you haven't answered my question yet," he said reproachfully.

For he was still harping on the same theme; he had let his curiosity develop into an obsession. Each day he resolved to have it out with the girl, even to use violence if she refused to answer. His eyes fell on a wooden bench by the roadside.

"Mind if we sit down a bit?" he said. "I rather think my pulse is slowing down again."

Nina complied with rather a bad grace. She didn't believe his stories of a pulse that slowed down on occasion, without rhyme or reason as far as she could judge. Plump, pink-cheeked, he didn't look in the least like the victim of a dangerous disease.

And somehow tonight she felt uneasy; the silence of the sleep-bound town affected her nerves, and she wished there had been people still about.

"Come closer, Ninette."

He had a string of pet names for her: Ninette, Ninouche, and even, garbling a name he had seen in a Russian novel, Ninouchka. A silly trick, to her mind, but she took care not to tell him so. He was a rich man, a "toff," and rich people, as she knew, were apt to be eccentric. Some of the women staying at the *Continental*, where she worked, were like that; they had the most absurd habits. One woman, for instance, brought her own bed-sheets with her, in black silk, professing that white sheets kept her awake.

She let him draw her towards him, and made no protest when his hand cupped a young, firm breast. After all, there was no

great harm in that. The trouble was, this didn't satisfy him. He was always trying to go farther; give him an inch and there was no knowing what he'd take! Cautiously, prudently, trying to divert her attention, he became more enterprising, and when, at last, she thrust his hand away, he would wax plaintive and express contrition—only to start it all over again a moment later.

"Can't you realize it proves my love for you, my wanting to . . . to do that?"

"It proves you're a man; that's all."

Then he would begin talking about his past in doleful tones.

"I've been through such a terrible time, Ninette."

She knew her cue.

"Ah, yes. You're thinking about that fellow who's doing time on your account."

"He isn't. They acquitted him."

"Well, then, I can't see what you have to worry about."

"You can't see? Don't you understand that man has got his knife into me? One of these days he'll track me down and . . ."

"What did you do to make him feel like that?"

"Oh, there was trouble about a girl . . . a woman."

"His wife, eh?"

His hands were roving again and, though she struggled her hardest, there was no detaching them. It was as if the tentacles of some large, hungry creature had fastened on her body. For the first time she felt really frightened of him.

"Ninouche . . . Ninouche darling. . . ." His hot breath fanned her cheeks.

"That's enough of it!" she cried. "Can't you leave a girl alone? Take your dirty paws off me. If you don't, I'll . . . I'll bite!"

And suddenly she did so. Michel's nose was just in front of her mouth, and she gave a vicious snap.

He sprang to his feet with a quaintly aggrieved expression, like that of a child who has been unjustly scolded. After fumbling for his handkerchief, he dabbed his nose.

"You can't say I didn't warn you," she muttered, settling her dress. "Really you're the limit! Always trying to find out

what don't concern you. You should know better at your age."

In his plus-fours and lozenged stockings he cut a grotesque figure as he wiped the blood from his nose, which now looked fatter, more bulbous than ever.

"Fed up with me?" she asked. Then she, too, rose, and made as if to walk away. "Because, you know, you've only got to say the word . . ."

"Please don't go," he begged her. "Surely you can stay a few minutes more."

The only light came from the moon and a few pale stars. For some moments they kept silence, and Michel pretended to be blowing his nose when a policeman walked by. Nina was the first to speak.

"It's all your own fault, really. Why must you start that business every time? You know I don't like it."

"Then . . . answer my question!" Despite his smarting nose, Michel was still gripped by his obsession.

"What question?"

"You know perfectly well."

"You mean, if I'm . . . if I've been with a man?"

"Yes, that's it," he muttered uncomfortably.

"All right, Mr Nosey Parker. *I have* . . . Now are you satisfied?" Sulkily she turned her back on him.

"Who was the man?"

"Why, the fellow I'm engaged to, of course."

"The one who's at Brest, in the Arsenal?"

"Who else should it be?"

"Ninouchka dear, come nearer."

But it was he who went up to her, and he pressed her to his breast more tenderly than ever, whispering in her ear:

"Then, why won't you . . . with me?"

"It ain't the same thing."

"Why not?"

"Because it ain't. . . . Now, come along, I want to get some sleep tonight."

"You'll meet me tomorrow as usual, won't you, dear?"

"Depends on how I feel."

"What's the matter? I haven't offended you, have I? Look here, Nina, if you like, I'll promise . . . not to start that again."

"That's what you always say."

"But this time I really mean it."

She burst out laughing. They were under a street-lamp and she had just noticed two big drops of blood on Michel's nose, one of them hanging on the tip, about to fall.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Sorry, I can't help it. You're so funny."

But she said it almost affectionately. He *was* funny, so different in his methods from the other fellows she had met. He reminded her of a fat bumble-bee in a kitchen blundering up every minute against the walls.

"No, don't start that again. I want to get back."

"Well, what about tomorrow?"

"Wait for me at the usual place. Perhaps I'll come. I say! What ever will your sister think when she sees your nose?"

Though, for safety's sake, he called himself "M. Emile," he was always coming out with things, and Nina knew quite a lot about his family. She knew, for instance, that his sister was staying with him and was going to have a baby, that she telephoned daily to her husband, and each call cost eighteen francs for three minutes.

She had also learnt that his young brother, a rather delicate lad, had developed a passion for gymnastics, and would spend hours attempting the wildest acrobatic feats, seconded by his tutor.

Actually, Kiki's latest hobby was boat-building. He had sent for a pamphlet entitled *Build Your Own Boat*, the advertisement of which had caught his eye in the boys' paper he took in, had bought the necessary wood and tools, and set to work. Edmond had given him a hand, and was now no less enthusiastic than his pupil.

All the same, they were continuing their gymnastic exercises with equal ardour, and sometimes even quarrelled over them, Kiki maintaining he could beat Edmond at certain feats on the horizontal bar. They had purloined Martine's measuring-tape, and were always measuring their biceps, calves, and chests.

On reaching the railway bridge, Nina gave Michel the usual

parting kiss. He, however, was seized by panic at the thought that perhaps she wouldn't come out with him again. And another thought was hovering in the background of his mind, that perhaps some other man . . .

And suddenly an access of desire came over him; there was nobody in sight—why not here and now? She seemed to guess what was in his mind and, slipping from his embrace, ran quickly across the bridge, calling over her shoulder:

“Ta ta, dear.”

One more unpleasantness, the day's last, had to be faced by Michel: his journey home, haunted by fears of being waylaid by some nocturnal prowler. As he hurried along he felt his strength failing, and decided to take his pulse the moment he was back.

An eerie sense of loneliness came on him as he entered the silent house. One would never have thought it occupied by four persons—not counting the child that was on the way. There was none of the vague animal warmth, the homely atmosphere, pervading a house that is lived in.

Michel had the largest bedroom, also the barest. And its emptiness was akin to something he often felt within himself, and which led him to prolong the moments when he held the soft warmth of Nina's body against his, and hunger for her kisses with their faint savour of garlic that he had come to love.

Slowly, with the precision he brought to everything he did, he undressed, folded his clothes, and felt his pulse—it was 48—; then did his nightly gargle, and finally walked bare-footed to the door to turn off the light, the switch beside the bed being out of action.

IV

EVEN had Philippe's visit to the *Hôtel de France*, one morning in early February, been noticed, it would have attracted little attention. All one would have seen was that in the big hotel dining-room that reminded one of a refectory he was lunching with a young couple who had arrived earlier in the day and had entered their names in the Visitors' Book as M. and Mme Grindorge.

In the afternoon the Grindorges went sight-seeing in La Rochelle—for once it wasn't raining—and Philippe, as it so happened, was standing at the door of one of the warehouses when they passed. After greeting them, he proceeded to show them round the refrigerator plant, then over a trawler and a collier, and finally the briquet factory.

There was nothing surreptitious about it. He could be seen from the windows of the offices on the Quai Vallin, though, as a matter of fact, no one happened to be watching.

Nor did the arrival of a tall, thin, bearded Russian at a small hotel near the station attract any notice. The manager and staff treated him with deference, as, when signing the Book, he had inscribed "Civil Engineer" after his name—a name so long and unpronounceable that, to simplify things, they addressed him as "Monsieur Ivan." On the third day after his arrival he came back in a small six-horse-power car that he had just acquired.

M. Ivan was out all day, driving about the town, and stopping now and then at its various garages to buy petrol in small quantities.

Towards the end of March there was talk at La Rochelle about the liquidation of the Rossignol garage, which, badly situated between one-way streets and ill-equipped into the bargain, had been on the down-grade for some years.

Then one fine day Rossignol paid his creditors in full, gave his garage a new coat of paint, and announced that he had gone into partnership with a wealthy Russian engineer, a M. Ivan. And at the beginning of April a notice-board appeared above the garage entrance: *Rossignol & Co., Carriers and Hauliers*. A fortnight later, ten enormous lorries of the latest model were to be seen lined up in the street outside the garage, each of them blazoned in big red letters, *Rossignol & Co.*

The conversation had come round to this subject as Philippe and Mme Donadieu sat at table one evening in early May. Summer Time had begun and they now could dine by daylight, though even on sunny days the dining-room was dark and the air damp, because of the big trees behind the house. Mme Donadieu had formed the habit of dining *tête-à-tête* with Philippe, who usually had something interesting to tell.

"Know what I've been thinking of, mother?" he asked that evening in a casual tone.

Naturally she said "No," and looked at him enquiringly.

"Some enterprising fellow has just set up as a carrier at La Rochelle. I haven't a notion what sort of stuff he proposes to carry, but I saw his fleet of lorries the other day. There are ten of them, all very big, and brand-new I should say."

Mme Donadieu, who knew that Philippe rarely spoke without some definite purpose, listened attentively.

"Today I heard something which, if true, might make a good deal of difference to us. I was told that the man who's running the business—he's a Russian, by the way—has been to see Varin twice...."

"Yes?" So far she had no notion why he was telling her all this.

"Of course, the explanation may be that he approached Varin with proposals for the road-transport of his fish. But there's another possibility; I shouldn't be surprised if he's offered to distribute Varin's briquets, in competition with us. Ten fast lorries delivering in the rural districts at the customer's door—well, we should have difficulty in keeping our end up against that."

Not for the first time, she was impressed by Philippe's business acumen. No other member of the household had had the faintest inkling of this danger—a serious danger, since at this time the briquet department was the only one showing a profit.

In the same casual tone Philippe went on talking while he ate his dinner.

"I haven't had time to go into the matter at all thoroughly. Still, one thing's obvious; our delivery service is shockingly out of date. But I'm afraid it wouldn't be any use asking the bank for another loan for the purchase of new lorries. . . . Cheese, mother?"

After helping himself he rang the bell.

"Some more butter, please, Augustin."

Philippe waited till the man had gone before continuing.

"As a matter of fact, I've had an idea, but I can't say as yet if

there's anything in it. It's this. Suppose that, instead of selling our coal ourselves . . . ”

Had Olsen been present, he'd have made an angry protest; Mme Donadieu, however, merely leant back in her chair and waited.

“Instead of *distributing* our coal ourselves, I should have said, suppose we were to delegate that service to a subsidiary company? You'll tell me, of course, that this is ruled out by the Will; under its provisions we're not allowed to dispose of any part of the business before Kiki comes of age. My answer is that this wouldn't be *disposing of* any branch of the concern . . . ”

And now she put her elbows on the table and gazed at him intently; she had a feeling that this moment was grave with consequences.

“Let me make myself clear, mother, if you don't mind. We should, of course, go on buying coal in England, and bringing it in our colliers. We should go on manufacturing our briquets. Only, as regards the handling of these there would be a slight modification. For our retail sales we should set up a new company, a subsidiary, which would buy our stocks at an agreed price and take over the delivery service for the area we now supply.”

“But who would run this subsidiary you're speaking of?”

“We should. In conjunction, of course, with the garage owning the lorries. It's quite simple, really. We supply the goods, they supply the transport.”

So far, so good. But what remained to be said needed more careful handling. Philippe stood up, lit a cigarette, and took some long puffs before continuing.

“At first sight, I grant you, there doesn't seem much point in tying ourselves up with another concern. But actually it would be to the advantage of us all; especially to your advantage, mother. As things stand, the profit on our coal is eaten up by the fisheries and shipping branches. And you, of course, have no direct interest in the business. The result of all this is that each of us has to struggle along on fifty thousand francs a year, and it rather looks as if, next year, we shan't get even that. Also, when Kiki comes of age, you'll have no more than a mere pittance, perhaps nothing at all.”

He was conscious of the portrait on the wall gazing down severely, but this didn't embarrass him in the least; quite the contrary. The thought that he was playing fast and loose with the provisions of the old man's Will, defying the domestic tyrant on his own ground, tickled his fancy.

"Of course, the subsidiary company would be an independent concern. Each of us would hold a certain number of shares in it, and yours would stand *in your own name*. Thus the profits wouldn't pass through the Donadieu accounts. . . . But, of course, all this is quite in the air; just a casual idea that crossed my mind."

It was nothing of the sort: a fact of which Mme Donadieu was perfectly aware. She had had ample time to take Philippe's measure, and, though full of indulgence for the young man, was not his dupe.

He knew very well what he was about, and, no doubt, had his axe to grind. Still, when all was said and done, wasn't he less dangerous to her than her son and daughter, who were all for strict compliance with the Will?

His proposal, as she saw clearly, was nothing but a scheme for by-passing the restrictions imposed by Oscar Donadieu, and regaining some freedom of action as to the estate.

"What is it?" she asked impatiently of Augustin, who had just entered.

"Madame Marthe wishes to know if she can come down and have a word with you, Madame." . . .

"Good evening, mamma," said Marthe, bestowing a quick kiss on her mother's forehead. Her "mamma" sounded as aloof as the most formal "Madame."

Though mother and daughter lived in the same house, they often let two or three days go by without seeing each other. Marthe alone still kept to the ritual instituted by Oscar Donadieu, and almost always announced her visit before coming down the two flights of stairs.

"You can stay, Philippe," she remarked when her brother-in-law made as if to leave the room. "What I've to say concerns you too."

In other words, like him, she had something up her sleeve, and

it was probably of a delicate order, as Olsen, who abhorred family discussions, hadn't come down too. Marthe was much better at that sort of thing, rarely yielded ground, and—this was her greatest asset—never lost her head under any circumstances.

Philippe expected her to begin with one of her usual sub-acid comments, for, since he and Mme Donadieu had, so to speak, been living together, the latter had formed the habit of smoking a cigarette and having a liqueur with her herb-tea after dinner.

Nothing of the sort! After Augustin had lit the lamps and shuffled out of the room Marthe began in what was, for her, quite an amiable tone.

"It's about the holidays. Jean and I were discussing that subject at dinner, and it struck us that it might be a good thing if you took yours first—immediately, in fact."

The family had already agreed that, as they had gone to the expense of renting the Saint-Raphael villa for a long period, the most practical course this year would be for each household to stay there in turn. At present Michel, Martine, and Kiki and his tutor were in the villa, but there were still some bedrooms vacant.

"We mustn't forget," Marthe hastened to add, "that the weather on the South Coast is quite different from ours. In fact, if you postponed your visit there to July, you might find the heat rather trying—with your figure. . . . Then there's Martine." She glanced at Philippe, as if to enlist his support for what she was about to say.

"You've seen her last letter to Philippe, haven't you? It seems that she'll have her baby a little prematurely, some time in June. So you'd be there when it happens."

Mme Donadieu smiled to herself. She had a shrewd idea of what was at the back of her daughter's mind. At this time of the year there was no one on the Riviera, and she, Marthe, wanted to be there at the height of the season. And, indeed, her next remark gave her flagrantly away.

"I've just had a letter from Françoise." Françoise was Mme Brun's daughter, the one who had married a duke. "She says she'll be at Cannes in July, and greatly hopes to see me. Saint-Raphael's quite near Cannes, of course. . . ."

Mme Donadieu nodded. There was no point in standing out

against her daughter, whose tenacity, once she had set her mind on anything, was proverbial in the family. Meanwhile she saw a way of turning the situation to account.

"Very well," she said. "I don't mind going now—but on one condition. That I take Augustin and the car with me."

Marthe pulled a long face.

"Well, I'm not sure if we can spare the car. I must ask Jean what he thinks."

She went upstairs and, after a longish absence, came down, still looking rather glum.

"Jean agrees about the car, though it will be a nuisance for him, not having it. But he won't hear of your taking Augustin; there's got to be a man here, in the daytime."

They confabulated for some time. Mme Donadieu had never learnt to drive. Engaging a chauffeur would come too expensive.

Then Philippe had an inspiration. Why not take Baptiste, the caretaker of the Donadieu "Château" at Esnandes?

Marthe jumped at the idea, but her mother was less enthusiastic.

"Really, I don't see Baptiste driving a car on the Riviera. For one thing, he looks such . . . such a yokel!"

Finally they reached a compromise. Baptiste was to be made presentable with a chauffeur's livery.

On the next day but one, which was fixed for her departure, Mme Donadieu was as excited as a young girl off for her first holiday on her own. She had ordered two half-mourning dresses, explaining that full mourning was uncalled for, and anyhow would look ridiculous on the Riviera. The car was crammed with luggage; Baptiste resplendent in brand-new livery.

Nothing further had been said about the subsidiary company, though Mme Donadieu had had two more meals *tête-à-tête* with Philippe. Only when on the point of leaving did she remark with affected casualness :

"By the bye, how do you propose to set about that plan you were speaking of the other evening?"

"I shall have to talk it over with Jean and Marthe to start with. If your signature is needed . . ." His gesture indicated that, in that event, he would hurry South to see her.

"Any message for Martine?"

"Tell her I'll be coming in a few days, and that she's to take great care of herself, and wrap herself up well in the evenings. I believe the night air can be very treacherous in those parts."

Mme Brun and Charlotte were at their window, the former counting on her fingers.

"Let's see. How many of them are left, now that the Queen-Mother's gone? Marthe and her husband, and Philippe. Only three. Why, the house is practically empty!"

She descended on the villa like a whirlwind, and created as much disturbance by herself as all the others put together.

Martine, who was more or less an invalid, usually kept to her room, which was on the first floor and had a balcony attached. Her only exercise was an hour's stroll each evening on the sea-front—and that only because the doctor had insisted.

Mme Donadieu took little notice of Kiki, hardly bestowing a glance on the boat, which was nearly finished.

Her first brush was with Michel, who had frowned when he saw the car. On the day after her arrival, Mme Donadieu had made an inspection of the villa, noting which taps were out of order, which shutters failed to close, and exclaimed indignantly at the forlorn aspect of the drawing-room, the emptiness of the conservatory.

And that evening a builder's man, summoned by her, made his appearance and went away with a long list of repairs and alterations to be carried out at once.

"Won't it cost rather a lot?" Michel ventured to ask.

"That can't be helped. This place isn't fit for human habitation; it's tumbling to pieces. Really, I can't think how you've stuck it out here all these months. But, of course, you're out so much—and you never come home till three in the morning, do you?"

Which home-thrust had the intended effect, and Michel made no further protest, merely sighing when his mother indulged in some new extravagance. One morning a complete set of garden furniture was delivered at the villa.

"You don't expect me to stay cooped up indoors all day, I hope?" she said, noticing her son's expression.

Another day a packing-case turned up, containing an assortment of liqueurs, mineral waters, cigars and cigarettes.

"What on earth do we want with all this stuff?" Michel couldn't help enquiring.

"Oh, I've some friends coming round tomorrow afternoon. . . . You've not been here two months, I suppose, without making some acquaintances? Well, I've done likewise—and they're very nice people. They belong to one of the big business families of Mulhausen."

She was brimming over with vitality, busy from morn till night, and devoted barely two hours a day to her daughter. She had the grounds, which had been running wild for two years, tidied up, the glass roof of the conservatory cleaned, and hired some exotic plants to garnish it.

Michel was greatly puzzled. How had she made the acquaintance of these new friends of hers, the Krugers? Actually, the explanation was simple; they had entered into conversation at a teashop, and three days later were bosom friends.

The Krugers were an Alsatian family owning big woollen mills at Mulhausen, and had bought the villa at Saint-Raphael in which they now were staying. They worked on the same system as the Donadieus; that is to say, various sections of the family—there were no less than fifteen of them—occupied the villa turn by turn.

A hundred yards from the Villa des Tamaris was another villa, with spacious, well-kept grounds and tall wrought-iron gates. In the afternoons its occupants could be seen going to the Valescure golf-links in a big yellow car, and sometimes, on gala nights, to the Cannes casino.

Mme Donadieu was interested, and even asked the tradespeople who they were. She learned that the villa was owned by a rich, eccentric old Englishwoman, whose whim it was to have a little court of young men always in attendance.

"I'll get to know her," she decided.

She went on spending; the dresses she had bought at La Rochelle looked dowdy and depressing in the brilliant sunshine of the South, so she had new ones made. She did not pay for them at once, but said:

"I want these things delivered at the Villa des Tamaris. I'm Madame Donadieu. You know the name, of course; we're ship-owners at La Rochelle."

The bills could wait. At Cannes she went one better, and for the first time in her life gambled at the tables. True, she only risked a hundred francs, and she had beginner's luck, winning three hundred after the croupier had explained how to place the stakes and so forth.

It was at the tables that she achieved her end, and struck up acquaintance with the opulent Mrs Gabell, whom everyone, despite her age, called "Minnie." Her husband, Mme Donadieu learned, was a whisky-distiller in a big way.

Meanwhile Michel fumed with suppressed irritation. If there was one thing he loathed it was disorder. He liked his days adjusted hour by hour to a fixed schedule; to breathe familiar air wherever he might be. And he also had a need to cut a leading figure, as he had done at La Rochelle, where Oscar Donadieu's eldest son was definitely "somebody," a man out of the ruck.

His mother had changed all that. The Krugers—the girls, to his disgust, were plain, devoid of charm—were at least the equals of the Donadiens, and they had brought two cars.

When, escorted by a couple of her courtiers, Mrs Gabell came to tea, Michel was vexed at observing that the young men's clothes were cut quite differently from his, being, he assumed, the last word in masculine *chic* at Paris or in London. Also they asked him tiresome questions, such as :

"Don't you play golf?"

He did, but so badly that he would rather give up going to the links than play in their company. Or :

"I suppose you always spend the winter in Paris?"

And then they would start discussing the various attractions of the European capitals and New York, or the technicalities of polo, which one of the young men played.

There seemed no point in trying to keep his end up; no doubt they found him as boring as he found them. He had only one resource, and that was to talk about his heart-complaint; on this ground, anyhow, they couldn't compete.

Sometimes he went upstairs to his sister, but Martine had developed a curious irritability and was sometimes quite short with him. On another occasion he ventured to give Kiki suggestions about the building of his boat, but the tutor had quickly made him realize he didn't know what he was talking about.

"O. has left the town abruptly," Philippe told him in a letter, *"but I don't think you need feel any anxiety. On the contrary, it probably means that she has decided to start a new life somewhere else —which is all to the good."*

Comparing Nina with Odette, he decided that in some ways she was more satisfactory, in others not. She was less docile than Odette, but she stirred his senses more. Though he had spent quite a sum of money on her, she still refused to come to the point. And there was a cloud on the horizon; in a fortnight's time, she told him, her "young man" would be coming on leave. If only he could persuade her to become his mistress before the fortnight was up . . . !

Even the climate got on his nerves. In the sun it was too hot; when he moved into the shade he started shivering. And the night air made him feverish.

Meanwhile, at meals, Mme Donadieu was always talking about a big dinner-party she had in view, at which the Krugers were to meet Mrs Gabell and her satellites; also a Genevan doctor whose acquaintance she had made at the casino.

Philippe, when he came for a week-end, seemed wholly to approve of all this. After a brief conversation with his mother-in-law about his project of a subsidiary company, he asked Michel to come for a stroll along the sea-front.

"I've discussed it with Olsen," he said, "and he seems to be coming round to my view. From the look of things this year's balance-sheet will be even less satisfactory than the last. The banks are beginning to turn nasty. And, as you know, our family expenses aren't going down. Your wife's just written for another four thousand francs."

"Is she still in Switzerland?"

"No. She's moved to San Remo."

"With the children?"

"She didn't mention them in her letter."

"Really, I think she might have let me know . . ." he grumbled. Philippe tapped him lightly on the arm.

"Listen, Michel. As I said, we're in rather a tight corner, and the question is—how to get out of it."

Though he had little real interest in the family business, Michel had much of the Donadieu squeamishness on certain matters, and he was genuinely shocked by the proposal to launch a subsidiary company.

"But surely it's . . . it would be a breach of the provisions of the Will, wouldn't it? We were expressly forbidden to alienate any part of the business."

"This wouldn't be an alienation. We're not parting with anything; merely delegating certain activities to another group."

But in the glance Michel gave Philippe there was as much rancour as resignation. He knew the others regarded him as a fool, and that he was in Philippe's hands; that his mother was trading on his weakness when she alluded to his home-comings at three in the morning; that Philippe was doing likewise when, almost in the same breath, he referred to Eva and to Odette. It was hitting below the belt—but he wasn't in a position to retaliate, even to protest.

"What does Marthe say to it?"

Marthe was his last hope; Marthe, who was as "Donadieu" as he himself and, as she had often shown, inflexible on points of family honour.

A picture rose before him: of the portrait of his grandfather, the Founder of the House, a naval architect with a big fan-shaped beard like that of a Jules Verne hero. Looking at that stern, dour face, one saw at once that this man—another Oscar—had never felt the least temptation to stray from the narrow path; that all his life had been hedged in by rules and self-imposed restrictions.

So compelling was his personality that his wife, Michel's grandmother, had never seemed to count in the family history. And she had carried self-effacement to the point of fading out of existence a few months after she had provided her lord and master with

a son. Michel felt convinced that, after her death, there had been no other woman in his life.

Then the first Oscar had been succeeded by Michel's father, who had carried on the Founder's work, and built up not only a fortune but a dynasty. Under his sway, the rigid principles Michel's grandfather had imposed on himself alone were extended to the household: his wife, his children, even the servants.

Little by little habits had crystallized into hard-and-fast rules, a family code whose basic principles no one, during the lifetime of Oscar the Second, had ever dared to call in question.

Then came his death—and with the thought of his father's death a frown settled on Michel's face. He had never fully accepted the theory of an accident: that his father had stumbled in the darkness and fallen into the harbour. What, he wondered, was the true explanation?

Then a new thought waylaid him. Why had he not been given the name of "Oscar," in accordance with the family tradition? Because of his mother, he had been told. She had never liked the name, and they did not want to vex her after a hard confinement. Many years later the name had been bestowed on the last-born Donadieu; but they had made haste to substitute a pet-name, "Kiki."

And now the last chapter of the family history was epitomized, it seemed, in this ambitious young man walking at his side under the plane-trees bordering the sea-front; in Philippe, who was expounding the most efficient method of distributing their coal and the various ways in which the Will could be construed.

If only, Michel thought, I hadn't had a weak heart....

But no! For once he was being honest with himself as he sauntered in the sunshine filtering through the leafage, and he had to own that even were he perfectly fit, he would probably have submitted as he was doing now. Suppose, however, his father had died when he, Michel, was twenty? Even so, there was no knowing. He had always been somewhat of a weakling, and his inferiority to others was constantly brought home to him, even on such occasions as the Sunday shooting-parties. How often, when he, Michel, was firing at a pheasant, would Baptiste fire at the same

moment, from behind him, and when the bird plumped down, exclaim in a tone that just failed to convince: "Good shot, sir!"

From early childhood he had been under his sister's thumb. Marthe, anyhow, always knew her mind, and she had very soon taken his measure. Though he was the boy, the eldest son, it was Marthe who, for instance, laid their sparrow-traps, wrung the birds' necks, and roasted them at the kitchen fire.

As for Martine and Kiki, they had never counted. Even the boy's father made no secret of his aversion for his puny, dull-witted younger son.

Yes, Marthe was the only one who might have made a stand. But Philippe had assured him that Marthe consented. . . .

As if all this weren't enough, he had to endure the spectacle of his mother, who by rights should still be in full mourning, plunging into a whirl of gaieties, behaving like a woman half her age.

This morning Michel felt exceptionally clear-headed, and he could see that, since his father's death, he had gone to pieces. Whereas his mother seemed to have taken a new lease of life. . . . Anyhow, what was the use of worrying? He was a sick man, he needed rest—and Nina gave him quite enough trouble as it was. If there was anything to be done, others must do it.

He dropped wearily on to a bench—as it so chanced, the very bench on which he had been sitting when the little chambermaid bit his nose.

"When are we to sign?"

"Immediately. I've all the documents with me. Mother consents."

"And Kiki's guardian?"

"I'll see him on my way back."

The sea was calm as a lake; he had a feeling that it would be a joy to plunge into those blue depths and find oblivion. Young men in white flannels were strolling in the sunlight, women in flimsy frocks or bathing-costumes lounging on the sands below. Two naval 'planes were circling over the bay.

After all, what was the point of fretting? What could he do? Already it was an effort for him to recall the aspect of the Donadieu

stronghold at La Rochelle, overshadowed by its immemorial trees and steeped in moisture by the Atlantic gales.

“I’ve got them to pay a million for the distribution rights.”

“For how many years?”

“Ten.”

He’d have done better not to mention this. Legally, no doubt, it could pass muster. But, in practice, it defeated the intentions of Oscar Donadieu, whose Will expressly safeguarded the minors’ rights.

“I have the figures with me, if you’d like to see them,” Philippe added.

But it was easy enough to juggle with figures. One thing was sure; if some capitalist was prepared to pay a million francs for the rights, they must be worth more than that. And if Philippe . . .

“Also each of us, mother included, will receive twenty Founders’ Shares in the new company.”

Yet, at this moment, had Michel seen a possible ally anywhere, in Marthe, or Olsen, or Martine, or even in one of the senior members of the staff (who with the years had acquired much of the Donadieu mentality), he might have made a stand, defied the young man beside him.

“Mother included,” Philippe had said. In other words, his mother had been bribed, as indeed they all had been, by an offer of some ready cash at a time when they were short of it. A picture rose before him of his mother, who at this moment was in the company of the crazy old Englishwoman, wearing a white jersey dress, a big white cape. And, for the first time, he glimpsed what had lain behind his father’s Will.

One evening the old man, bringing to bear on this the perspicacity he brought to every problem, had drawn up the clauses of the Will, so baffling at first sight. No doubt he had foreseen the course of events; had guessed that his wife at the age of fifty-six, free at last from his restraint, would kick over the traces, play fast and loose with the Donadieu tradition. Quite likely he had foreseen that he, Michel, would yield supinely, and even Marthe accept the new order. . . .

Never before had Michel asked himself if he loved his father;

now, at last, he felt a thrill of filial devotion, and with it a tightening of the heart. Almost without thinking he took his gold box from his waistcoat pocket and put a digitalin pill on his tongue. Then he began coughing violently, as the pill wouldn't go down, and for a moment seemed as if he were going to be sick. Passers-by were beginning to stare, and Philippe slapped him on the back two or three times.

"Come along to that café, and we'll sit down for a bit. You can sign the Agreement when we're there."

Just then Kiki and Edmond walked by. They were carrying their cockle-shell boat down to the beach for a trial trip. Both were in bathing-kit that revealed their lean young bodies; their eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"My dear Frédéric,—You'll be surprised to see that I am writing from San Remo; no doubt you thought me still in Switzerland. I told you nothing in my last letters; I'd had a very great shock and I preferred to wait till I could collect my thoughts."

"You know the kind of hotel we were staying at, and the kind of people one met there, and, worst of all, the kind of conversation one had to put up with. From morn till night I heard nothing but disquisitions on T.B., but the subject bored me and I never paid much attention."

"Well, I'm getting to believe that there's a sort of fatality guiding one's actions. I chose that hotel just to get right away from the rotten life I'd been having, and into a new atmosphere. And, of course, I had the usual ideas about mountain air, and the virtues of a simple, healthy life in restful surroundings. . . ."

"As it so happened, there was a nice young doctor staying at the hotel (No, don't jump to the obvious conclusion, Frédéric dear!), and we saw a good deal of each other. He told me his lungs were affected. What struck me most was his enormous zest for life. You could see it in his eyes, in his gestures, in everything he did. So much so that I sometimes felt almost embarrassed when I was with him—there was something so frantic about it all."

"Then one day my little boy, Jean, fell ill; a cold to start with, that developed into bronchitis. Anywhere else I shouldn't have felt

much anxiety. But here I'd heard so much about lung trouble that when my nice young doctor proposed taking him to a colleague for an X-ray examination, I consented.

"I hope you'll never have to live through an experience like that, and hear somebody say gravely, 'We must have a blood-test.' Then he asked me such questions as, 'Did his father suffer from tuberculosis? Had you any trouble of the kind in your childhood?' All I knew was that, when only a few months old, I'd had a bad go of pneumonia; in fact, the doctor had given me up.

"Those were two horrible days. Séances in front of the X-ray screen, sputum tests, and the rest of it. And then . . .

"Then came that 'Yes,' which makes you feel like sinking into the earth, and one by one all your poor little illusions are blown away to nowhere! And you know you're cut off from the world of normal, healthy people, and have become that pitiful, half-dead creature, 'an invalid.'

"The queer thing is the quickness of the change—from the state of health (as one believes) to the sick-list. And promptly—that's almost the worst thing about it—one gets the invalid mentality, starts walking like an invalid, fussing about one's health, taking precautions.

"So that's how things stand, my friend. Jean is consumptive. And poor little Evette has some lesions too. And they've got it, not from their father, but from me. . . .

"I don't feel like writing to Michel, but when you next meet, perhaps you'll let him know. He will understand why I have had to ask for money so often these last few weeks.

"As I am much the most seriously ill, I have left the children in the best sanatorium in that part of Switzerland. Evette is in no great danger, they tell me; the lesions should heal in a few months. It may take longer for Jean, a year or so, they think; but there's little doubt he, too, will recover.

"As for me—no, I'm not out for pity or the glamour of the dying heroine of a play—as you're probably thinking, you old cynic, you! But they're talking of a pneumothorax. A word I've heard pretty often here, and each time I heard it I went goose-flesh all over.

"They assure me that in two or three years' time, if I take care of

myself and live an invalid's life, I have quite a good chance. . . . My doctor friend entreated me to stay in Switzerland, and nearly scared me into doing so.

“But I realized that, if I stayed, it would mean that for perhaps the rest of my days I'd have to live in that sanatorium atmosphere. You can't imagine what it's like. One has to see them, to know. And that's where I belong! The most awful thing, perhaps, is how the doctors encourage them to hope, even when there's no hope and the family has been warned—to be ready for 'bad news.'

“That, Frédéric, is why I've come to San Remo. I didn't really choose it; I picked it out at random from a list of resorts on the Italian Riviera. And I pictured endless sunshine, mimosas—alas, they're over for this year!—and a divinely blue sea.

“Really, I have come here to think things over, and make plans. In three years' time—if they aren't lying to me, as they usually lie to T.B. cases—I shall be fit to return to the old life at La Rochelle.

“I know what my mother would advise. She's a true Italian, and would prefer six months of 'crowded life'—especially if she'd never known a better one than . . . well, you know what it was like—to the dull business of 'lingering on.'

“My doctor friend—he's a fair young man and hails from Lille—writes to say he wants to join me here, and burn up in two hectic months what little is left of his lungs. But I'm telling him not to come.

“An Englishman, an officer in the Indian Army who always spends his leave in Italy, is making love to me, and I must say he does it rather nicely. Yesterday he took me to Monte Carlo in his speed-boat; it does fifty miles an hour, and I wished it had gone even faster! I treat myself in a sketchy sort of manner. But I smoke forty cigarettes a day, to the despair of my doctor.

“Don't give me advice, please. I don't need it. The only thing is to let the sunlight, the marvellous air we have here, do their work.

“Write to me poste restante. And please don't say anything that will only make me feel more badly. I suppose you'll think it's up to you to give me a fatherly lecture, but you wouldn't mean a word of it; if you were in my shoes, I know exactly what you'd do!

"So I've the choice between . . . No, one can hardly talk of 'choosing' when one's cornered.

"Nanny has stayed with Evette. Everyone here calls me 'Senorita'! . . . And the real tragedy, believe it or not, is that I haven't any money left. They dole it out to me in ridiculously small sums. Of course the family don't realize that a day may come when a telegraphic money order will decide things for me, one way or the other. . . .

"Don't think too badly of me. Remember how I struggled to 'fit in,' especially in the early days. And, if you believe in heredity, take into account what my mother's like; when I last heard from her she was in Tahiti. I wonder if she, too, is consumptive, or if I got it from my father, whom I can't remember at all.

"Who knows? Perhaps by the time you get this letter it will all be over. In fact, I'm so much inclined to think this, that at long last I may as well confess something to you, Frédéric my friend. . . . I felt like crying—isn't it absurd!—when I wrote 'my friend.' For you were the man with whom the girl I was, greedy for life and love, should have thrown in her lot.

"I can see you smile. Never once did you dream of making love to me. I had only the crumbs from your table—but how I treasured them! And no one in that dreary household ever guessed; not even Michel, who used to grumble, but had no idea. . . . Can you imagine why he grumbled? It was because he thought it was you who'd taught me to smoke!!

"That's what they're like!

"I hear the speed-boat buzzing round and round almost under my window. . . . If I am false to you tonight, it won't be with a man, an army officer from India, but with a speed-boat that is doing fifty miles an hour, in a dream-world of moonlight, where there are no such things as lungs!

"Clasp my hand hard, as you used to do each evening when you left me—how I loved the pressure of your warm, dry fingers!—and say in that 'special' voice of yours (I can hear it now across the noise of the speed-boat):

"Good night, little girl!"

"Yours forlornly,—Eva."

V

LEANING against the bar at the *Boule Rouge* was a swarthy young man, whom Michel recognized as one of Mrs Gabell's friends. Though obviously of Levantine origin, or perhaps a Turk, he was known to everyone as "Freddie." Michel nodded carelessly, then gave no more thought to the young man. He had more serious things to think about; Nina's fiancé was due to arrive in two days' time—and he still had failed to bring it off.

Indeed, he had made no progress whatsoever. In the pink glow of the alcove he was following the usual procedure, the girl submitting with even more reluctance than usual to his clumsy pattings and pawings.

A moment came when she got up and went to the Toilet, and Freddie, noticing this, came up and sat beside Michel.

"A juicy little bit, eh?" he said with a knowing leer. From his tone he might have been as intimate with her as Michel. Paying no heed to the scowl that greeted this opening, he continued: "She's at my hotel, on my floor, as a matter of fact. I've often noticed how washed-out she looks in the mornings, and I guessed she'd been making a night of it." In a slightly lower tone he added: "Getting what you want?"

. That was how it began. Then Nina reappeared, and Freddie went back to the bar.

"So you know that gigolo?" she remarked. "He's on my floor."

What prompted Michel, after seeing her back as far as the railway bridge, to return forthwith to the *Boule Rouge* and have a whisky-and-soda with Freddie at the bar? He may even have drunk two glasses of whisky—though his doctor had warned him on no account to touch alcohol—for, less than a quarter of an hour later, he was talking to Mrs Gabell's gigolo as to a boon companion.

"You see how it is, Freddie? The only snag is finding a place. She won't hear of coming to a private room at an hotel. And at my place, of course, there's nothing doing, with all my family there."

Freddie, too, had had a good many drinks, and both men were

at the stage when one swears eternal friendship and develops fixed ideas. And the idea now obsessing them was—how to enable Michel to have his way with Nina.

Suddenly Freddie had an inspiration.

“I’ve got it, old boy! Why not drop in at the hotel and ask to see me? You’ll be shown up to my room. I’ll tootle off to the barber’s for a shampoo or something, and while I’m there, you’ll ring for the chambermaid. After that . . .”

He guffawed. Michel patted his pockets, then turned to the barman.

“Chalk it up, please, with the rest.”

For already he’d run up a pretty big score. . . . It was half-past three before they left the cabaret together, and for another half-hour they roamed the streets, arm-in-arm, reluctant to go to bed. At last Freddie turned into the *Continental*. When he came in sight of the Villa des Tamaris, Michel was surprised to see lights on in nearly all the rooms.

A bed had been reserved for Martine at a nursing-home. At six that evening Dr Bourgues had been sent for, as she complained of considerable pain.

“I know what I’m talking about,” the doctor reassured her. “You’ve two or three days more to go, at least.”

But, at one in the morning, he had an urgent call from the villa. After a glance at Martine he announced that it would be rash to move her, and rang up for a nurse.

For some reason Michel was vexed by the sight of all the lights on. There was no one in the conservatory when he entered it and, noticing a cake on the table, he cut himself a slice. People were moving overhead, but he felt no inclination to go upstairs. His wife had had two children and Marthe had had hers at home, so he knew all about confinements, which he had come to associate with a sick-room atmosphere, a disagreeable smell of anaesthetics. And he was scowling as he helped himself to a glass of the whisky put ready for the doctor, and munched a second slice of cake.

Someone opened the door, and, looking round, he saw Kiki in pyjamas, a scared expression on his face.

"Isn't it over yet?" the boy asked. He had tried to persuade Edmond to sit up with him, but without success, and his nerves were all to pieces.

Meanwhile Baptiste was busy in the kitchen putting kettles on to boil, and the nurse kept running up and down the stairs.

Michel wondered what to do. To go to bed as usual might seem callous. He was no longer wearing plus-fours, but a new summer suit which he was afraid of creasing if he dropped off in an arm-chair. He crept upstairs, changed into an old coat, and came down again.

The drinks had taken effect, and he fell at once into a heavy sleep, but even so he was dimly conscious of what was happening. A moment came when, waking with a start, he became aware that his mother and the doctor were in the room, and had been talking for some minutes.

It was an odd feeling, to wake up like this in the conservatory, which he had never seen before in the early hours. Light was flooding in from every side and from above as well, and, when he turned his head, he had a sudden glimpse of vividly blue sea and fishing-smacks that seemed floating in mid-air.

"Is it over?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

"Yes, but you'd better not go up yet. She's sleeping."

"A girl?"

"No, a boy. He weighs six pounds, which isn't bad considering he was born nearly a fortnight too soon."

Then Mme Donadieu bundled Michel out, as she had some more things to ask the doctor. Kiki, who had fallen asleep at last, was wrestling with a particularly unpleasant nightmare. The charwoman was opening windows, letting the brisk morning air sweep through the house.

"That you, Philippe?" Martine's voice was a mere whisper. The nurse was holding the telephone-receiver for her. Little blobs of sunlight danced on the white counterpane.

"What? Oh, you were asleep? . . . Listen, Philippe. I've something to . . ." She couldn't get the words out, and the nurse patted her shoulder encouragingly.

"That's all right, Madame. Don't hurry!"

"Philippe, we—we have a son!"

Martine's bed faced the sea, and the window had been opened, as it was such a fine, warm morning. But her tears blurred everything; she couldn't even see her son in the cradle beside the bed.

"What's that? Please speak louder, Philippe dear. Yes . . . a boy. No, I'm quite well really. But I'm glad it's over. He's bigger than they expected, six pounds. You're coming today? What? Not at once? But . . . What did you say?"

She couldn't hear properly. She was too exhausted. Letting herself sink back on the pillow, she signed to the nurse to speak into the receiver.

"Yes, I'm the nurse. . . . She's a bit tired. Oh no, nothing serious. Just weak. . . . By the night train? You'll be here at six-thirty tomorrow morning? Right, I'll tell her."

Martine made a hasty gesture, to show she wanted the receiver again. All she said was:

"Bye-bye, Philippe. Come as quick as you can."

The nurse explained:

"Your husband has an appointment this afternoon, for signing a very important contract. He told me you knew about it, and you'd understand."

She hardly heard what the nurse was saying. Everything was growing blurred, merging into a golden mist: Philippe, the contract, her baby, the blue sea that a white speed-boat was churning into snowy streaks of foam . . .

She woke with a start; she'd just dreamt that it wasn't true, she hadn't had a baby.

"Where is he?" she cried.

"There's His Majesty," the nurse smiled, glancing at the cradle. "Had a nice sleep?"

It was close on noon, and the curtains had been drawn to keep out the glare. There was a distant sound of music; a band was playing at one of the cafés on the sea-front, where people were having cocktails before luncheon.

"Your brothers have come, Madame. They want to see their nephew."

The whole day went by like this, with long spells of drowsiness, brief visits from the family. The doctor came twice. Mme Donadieu, after excusing herself, went out to tea; there was no point, she said, in letting the Krugers know. True, they had no contacts with La Rochelle, nor need they learn the date of Martine's marriage. Still, one might as well be on the safe side. . . .

Michel stayed a quarter of an hour with his sister, remarked dutifully that it was a fine, sturdy-looking kid, and that the noise it was making was a sign of "character." Kiki fidgeted, and wouldn't approach his sister's bed; in fact, he seemed rather vexed with her.

Martine woke only twice in the course of the night. A night-light was burning, the nurse dozing in her chair, the child in its cradle.

"What's the time?"

"Quarter-past six, Madame."

"Wasn't that a train whistling just now?"

"It couldn't be his train—unless it's ahead of time."

"Open the windows, please. Tidy up the bed, and give me the glass, and a damp towel. Oh, and my powder-box too, please."

Everyone else in the house was asleep. The charwoman could be heard opening the front door.

"That was a train, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but it was going in the direction of Marseilles, I think."

"I expect he'll take a taxi."

"If he can find one at this hour."

After a long wait, during which the minutes seemed to crawl, they suddenly speeded up, flashed by like seconds. A car purred in the distance; then another, coming towards the villa. It stopped outside the garden gate. There came a sound of footsteps on the gravel; a moment later, on the stairs.

"Please go," Martine said to the nurse.

And suddenly Philippe was standing there, in the doorway, looking, heaven knew why, much taller than she'd expected, and asking breathlessly:

"Martine! Where is he?"

He had shaved in the train. His cheeks were cool, he brought with him a waft of clean, fresh air.

While he bent over the cradle, Martine observed him anxiously. Didn't he seem a shade put out? Could it be that his son did not come up to expectations. He seemed afraid to touch the baby, put forward his hand cautiously as if—

Then suddenly he flung himself on the bed and hugged Martine so hard that she gasped for breath.

“Oh, Philippe!” she panted. “What ever has come over you?”

For he was crying. Never had he wept like that before, his whole body shaken by sobs.

“Martine darling! I'm so glad!” He straightened up, dried his eyes, then frowned when he saw how pale and tired she was looking.

She could read each fugitive emotion on his face, and she understood, too, when suddenly his gaze settled on the sunlit sea. The expression he had now was characteristic; the slotted eyes had an almost fierce intentness, and his under lip jutted forward truculently. He was holding Martine's hand so tight that it made her wince. Abruptly he dropped it, and stepped back from the bed.

“You'll see!” he exclaimed.

He seemed unable to keep still, and fell to pacing the room, halting as often at the window as at his son's cradle. A yellow sun hung low on the horizon, gulls were skirmishing for the small fish discarded by the fishermen, a municipal watering-cart was rumbling along the sea-front.

“Has he come?” Mme Donadieu asked the charwoman.

“Yes. I heard a gentleman go upstairs.”

She hesitated, shrugged her shoulders. Better leave them to themselves for yet a while.

“You can't understand,” he was saying. “But I do wish you'd try to see my point of view, or, better still, feel as I do about these things.”

Never before had Martine seen him in this state of emotion, so little master of his feelings. As he stood at the window, gazing sunwards, he seemed to be letting the level light seep in by every pore. He had flung off his coat, his shirt showed dazzlingly white;

he was wearing a belt, and one saw the sinewy yet graceful lines of his figure.

"I very nearly threw up everything and came here by the first train when I got your message yesterday. I suspected that you'd feel hurt if I didn't; that you wouldn't understand. . . . But—look at this!"

He picked up his coat, took out a sheaf of papers, held them athwart a sunbeam, then placed them on the cradle.

"Was it as fine as this yesterday?" he asked.

"Yes."

"So it was at La Rochelle—for a wonder! The first decent day we'd had for ages. At three we all met at my office, Goussard the lawyer, Grindorge . . ."

"Did you have lunch with them?"

"With Grindorge and his wife, you mean? Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, for no particular reason. Go on. . . ."

It was at that luncheon-party that Philippe had announced the great news to his friends.

"Martine's brought it off!"

"Yes? A boy or a girl?"

The Grindorges, who had two children, were unimpressed. All that seemed to interest Mme Grindorge was to learn whether Martine would suckle the child herself.

"Of course she will!"

"Don't be too sure. That's what I said, but the doctor put his foot down."

But Philippe had laughed away her doubts. And now he was gazing down at the cradle, on which lay a sheaf of documents, amongst them a big blue contract form.

Martine, who was eagerly watching every fugitive expression on his face, saw him frown suddenly. He had heard footsteps on the stairs. He stepped quickly to the door and opened it. Mme Donadieu had at last decided to come up.

"Well, what do you think of your son?" she asked in her strident voice.

Philippe dabbed her forehead with his lips, and murmured:

"Later on, mother, if you don't mind. I'd like to be alone with Martine for a bit."

He closed the door; then, standing beside the cradle, said in a low, pensive voice:

"Do you know, all sorts of thoughts were chasing through my head last night when I was in the train. . . . Somewhere in Russia—in the Caucasus, if I'm not mistaken—there's a chap called Smirnoff, or some such name, who for several years has been getting some quite remarkable results by crossing various kinds of fruit. For instance, he has managed to cross an apricot with a cherry-tree, by a special technique of his own, and the result is a new sort of fruit, totally different from either a cherry or an apricot."

"Why on earth are you telling me all this?"

He pointed to the baby in the cradle.

"Because at one moment I wondered if he'd be a little Donadieu or a little Dargens."

"Why not a mixture—fifty-fifty?" she smiled.

"No."

He started pacing the room again, and she realized that he was not talking on the spur of the moment: that this problem had been haunting him for a long while.

"I want our son to be, like Smirnoff's fruit, something brand new, unique—the starting-point of a new dynasty." His eyes shifted from the child to his wife's face. "And I've been wondering whether, when you come back to La Rochelle, we should go on living in your mother's house. Better not, I think. It's too damned 'Donadieu' for my liking. Sorry! Perhaps I shouldn't worry you with these details just now."

"On the contrary."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I've always been hoping we wouldn't live any longer in that gloomy house, or even in La Rochelle."

Why did he smile, and why did his eyes take on that steely look that she had often seen in them when certain subjects were broached. He walked to the window and, gazing out, murmured as if to himself:

"No, we shan't stay there much longer."

She caught the words, and her face lit up. But somehow, with all her pleasure, she couldn't repress a vague anxiety.

He came back to the cradle and she watched him pick up the documents, flicking them with his fingers to make sure all were there before replacing them in his pocket. Once again she was struck by the neat precision of his gestures.

"It's an odd thing," he remarked, "but, to create a new species, one has to use an old, well-established parent stock."

He had never studied botany, or genetics, of course. Indeed, he'd never studied any subject deeply. But he had a flair for any scraps of knowledge that might come in handy, and a keen sense of realities. It was enough for him to skim the contents of a five-hundred-page book for a quarter of an hour or so, and he had grasped what was essential in it—essential for him, that is to say.

These modern theories of genetic control, and the possibility of breeding new species, had caught his fancy, and once again he planted himself beside the cradle and gazed intently at his son—who struck him as, if anything, rather uglier than the general run of babies.

Watching him, Martine felt her anxiety becoming more precise. She now was almost certain he was keeping something back.

"What's on your mind, Philippe?"

He seemed to come out of a dream.

"Oh, nothing."

But something was on his mind, though it hadn't taken definite form as yet, and he could not have found words for it. The things he had just been saying, his sudden uprush of emotion, the sea, dotted now with small white boats, the noises of the house; all seemed merged into a whole, from which a new element, a new feeling was emerging. A feeling that was in some way disquieting, for Martine saw him pucker his brows.

"Come near me," she said.

It seemed an effort for him to leave the cradle, but he sat down on the edge of the bed, then ran his hand through his hair, smiling down at her.

"What were you thinking about, Philippe?"

"It's hard to explain, but I'll try. . . . For those fishermen down

there, it's just a fine spring day like any other. And yet—there's a new being here, beside us, who's just come into the world. No one has the faintest notion of what he'll be, but he has latent in him every possibility—every single one we can conceive of. See what I mean?"

There was a note of strange exaltation in his voice that disquieted Martine still more.

"Possibilities of greatness or disaster. Possibilities of carrying on my work, the task I've set before me, and . . ."

"Philippe!"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. . . . Philippe darling, I love you so much and . . . oh, how I wish we could be together always, just we three!"

He stood up, a sulky look on his face.

"There you are! That's just like a woman! When I was talking to you about . . . about . . ." He couldn't find the words. But for all its vagueness, it was something of enormous importance, of that he was certain. And she hadn't even mentioned the contract he had brought, though it counted for as much in their future as the birth of their child!

It had been in his mind when he talked to her about the Russian professor and his experiments. He, Philippe, was, so to speak, a graft on the Donadieu family tree—and very soon the rest of it would be so much useless timber. The new company had just been launched and, on the motion of Grindorge, the principal shareholder, Philippe was its managing director.

And now a child was born. . . .

"Why are you looking like that? Have I said something wrong?"

"No, dear. Don't take any notice. . . . I haven't had any breakfast yet, not even a cup of coffee."

"Poor darling! Go downstairs at once and have something."

"All right. But I won't be more than a few minutes. I'll only have a snack."

"You needn't hurry. Nurse has . . . has quite a lot to do to me, you know."

He didn't—and he preferred not to know all the unpleasant, not to say squalid details involved with his son's birth.

"Ask nurse to come, please." She got the words out with a rush, and he had a feeling she was going to cry. In a rush of compassion he put his arms round her, and now her tears flowed freely.

"Martine," he murmured, "darling little Martine. You mustn't mind the way I talk; of course I don't mean to hurt you. Only, I'm a man, you see, and a man's mind works differently from a woman's. It's our son I'm thinking of all the time, I assure you. But I think of him on different lines."

"You haven't even taken him in your arms!"

That was because he hadn't dared. Somehow that little lump of almost fluid flesh intimidated him.

"Shall I?"

"Give him to me."

He picked the child up gingerly, kissed the top of its head without any pleasure, and placed it on the bed beside Martine, who was smiling through her tears.

"Ask anyone who knows about it, and you'll be told he's a very nice-looking baby."

"I'm sure he is."

"No, you think he's hideous! . . . Now hurry off and have some breakfast. And don't forget about sending nurse; it's high time she attended to me."

When he had gone she gave way to a fit of weeping—why, she had no idea. All she knew was that what she needed was what her old Nanny used to call "a nice, good cry." The nurse remarked sagely, as she started operations:

"You know, Madame, that's how they are. They can't help it really."

"Who?"

"Men, I mean—husbands—for the first few days anyhow. They don't feel about it like we do."

No, she'd got it wrong. Martine wasn't unhappy, and she had no grievance against Philippe. She was crying only because—she felt like crying.

Meanwhile Philippe was breakfasting with Michel in the conservatory. There was not the least trace on his face of the emotional crisis he had undergone a few minutes before. That was

something about him which often amazed Martine: his capacity for regaining self-control at a moment's notice. Still, there was a shade of anxiety in his voice when, as he helped himself to marmalade, he asked his brother-in-law:

"It went off all right, didn't it? I mean, she didn't have much pain?"

"I don't think so. I was down here, in that armchair, all the time, and I hardly heard a sound from her room."

"And how are *you* feeling now?"

Actually, Michel, who was in a light suit, with buckskin shoes, looked exceptionally fit. But Philippe's question was enough to make him pull a long face and say lugubriously:

"My pulse is still terribly slow. I'm feeling rotten. . . . Oh, by the way . . ." He paused.

"Yes?"

"I've just had a letter from my wife. Guess where she is."

"At San Remo, surely." Philippe bit his lip.

"How did you know?"

"My father's had a letter from her."

"Oh, has he? What did she tell him?"

"That she'd moved to San Remo."

"Was that all? Really, I can't make head or tail of it. I've just had a letter from her—it reads like a business letter!—asking me to meet her. She suggests Cannes or Nice, to balance more or less our travelling expenses. From what she writes I gather that she has something important to say, and we'll have to come to a decision. She didn't even mention where the children are."

"They've stayed in Switzerland."

"Oh, really? Isn't it absurd! Your father knows more about my family than I do. What on earth can she be up to, all by herself, at San Remo?"

Philippe was watching the play of light and shadow in the garden. Sunlight came flooding through the glass roof on to his shoulders, and he felt an agreeable drowsiness stealing over him. Probably it was the effect of the long night journey in the train. He hardly heard what his companion was saying, till some words caught his attention.

"... ask for a divorce."

He looked round quickly.

"What's that? Are you intending to divorce her?"

"Of course not. I said 'Provided she doesn't ask for a divorce.' It wouldn't do at all, would it? Have you any news of... of that girl?"

"Personally, no. But I believe my father's heard from her."

"Well, I'm iggered!" Michel sounded quite indignant. "He seems to hear from everybody, while I..."

His expression was so comical that Philippe couldn't help smiling. Michel gave him a sour look.

"I shall ask mother to let me have the car tomorrow afternoon to go to Cannes. Then I'll learn what it's all about."

There was a knock at the door, and the nurse put her head in.

"Madame says you can come now."

"Is she by herself?"

"No, Madame Donadieu is there."

"Say I'll be up in a moment."

He had finished his breakfast, but he still had something to say to Michel, and he began by locking the door.

"The Agreement was executed yesterday. We only need your signature and Marthe's now. Albert Grindorge has paid the agreed sum, a million francs, into the bank, so each of us has a credit of two hundred thousand. I've brought you ten thousand in cash, in case you happen to be short of ready money."

He fetched a pen and an inkpot, which proved to be empty, so he had to hunt round for a bottle of ink. Michel rose heavily, scrawled his signature, then carefully chose a pill from his gold box and put it on his tongue.

Upstairs, Martine was showing signs of impatience.

"Why doesn't he come?" she asked her mother.

The nurse ventured to intervene.

"He's talking to Monsieur Michel," she explained. "I expect it's about business, as they've locked the door."

"But the doctor'll be here any moment now," Martine grumbled. Then her face lit up as she added, to her mother: "He's promised

to let me know today the results of the test—of my milk, you know. I do hope it'll be all right."

There were footsteps on the stairs. Philippe was replacing his wallet in his pocket as he stepped into the room.

VI

In the telegram, with which she answered Michel's letter, Eva had said: "*Three sharp, Carlton, Cannes.*"

The tyres of the big blue car squelched on the asphalt; the masts of all the yachts in harbour were steeped in sunshine. Baptiste, in the full flush of his promotion to the rank of chauffeur on the Riviera, drove down the long, resplendent avenue in a sort of ecstasy, and Michel had to rap on the glass panel between them to persuade him to stop outside the cream-white façade of the *Carlton*.

Some people hadn't finished lunch, and almost all the seats under the gay parasols dotted about the terrace were occupied. After threading his way between them, Michel went up to the hotel porter.

"Is Madame Donadieu here?"

The man looked dubious, then examined the pink-and-white slips on a board and, just to make sure, ran his eyes over the Visitors' Book.

"Are you quite sure the lady's staying here?"

All the people round him were talking English; girls in the sketchiest of bathing-costumes brushed him with their bare shoulders. Sulkily he waited on the top step, surveying the crowded terrace with half-closed eyes.

"Michel!"

At first he couldn't make out where the voice came from.

"Hullo, Michel! This way!"

Then he saw a hand waving to him above one of the deep wicker armchairs. As Michel made his way to it hesitantly, a tall young man sprang up from the chair beside Eva's.

"Let me introduce Captain Burns."

The young man held out his hand, and its grip made Michel squirm.

Obviously he had been wrong in expecting his wife to dress for the *Carlton* terrace as she had done at La Rochelle. Still, she really carried it too far. She was in a flamboyant yachting costume, the sort one sees in musical comedy, a sailor's cap with a huge gold badge on it perched at a rakish angle on her thick brown hair. From her chair she extended a languid hand, saying in an exaggeratedly affectionate tone :

"Sit down, my dear. What'll you have? . . . Bob, would you order a whisky-and-soda for my husband—and then go for half an hour's stroll somewhere?"

Eva seemed intoxicated—with sunshine, or with love—and there was something almost indecent in this unabashed exposure of her joy. With her moist red lips, darkly glowing eyes, and attitude of supreme *abandon*, she might have been an incarnation of the languor of the South, at one with her environment of light and colour, palm-trees and a sea too blue to seem real.

While the waiter served the drink, she gave her husband a prolonged stare.

"You haven't changed a great deal. A bit fatter, that's all."

It was all he could do not to lose his bearings; to remind himself that this woman was his wife, that only an hour ago he had been lunching with his mother, Kiki and Edmond at the villa, which was pervaded now, as he'd heard his brother remark, by "a smell of a baby."

An ear-splitting din drew his eyes seawards, and he saw Burns at the wheel of a big speed-boat, putting out from the hotel landing-stage, followed by the admiring gaze of the crowd on the terrace.

"Well, Michel, I'll tell you how things stand."

A rather curious thing was happening. At La Rochelle, when they had something private to say to each other, they always talked in English. And now, though most of the people round them were English or American, they fell into the old habit and spoke that language—which, perhaps, was after all more suitable for what they had to tell each other.

"I suggest you smoke a cigarette or a cigar. Yes, a cigar. That

may help. I wonder if you guessed that I chose this place deliberately for our meeting? With all these people looking on, we'll have to keep our heads and talk quietly—and that's just as well. Tell me first; has Martine had her baby?"

"Yes."

"A boy?"

He nodded, and lit a cigar, as she had suggested, his eyes fixed on the speed-boat weaving snow-white circles on the blue. After a moment's silence he, too, asked a question.

"Where are the children?"

"I left them in Switzerland. . . . Look here! As I don't really know where to begin, I may as well begin at the end. And please try to take it calmly, and not make a scene in front of all these people. Captain Burns is my fiancé; my fiancé or my lover—it comes to the same thing really." She gave a quick glance round her to remind him once more that there were others within earshot. "You don't say anything? That's sensible of you. . . . Or perhaps you remember that I never once reproached you for—for the things you did?"

Fortunately Michel had his cigar; it helped him to keep himself in countenance. There were people only a few feet away, and Eva was talking in a low voice, with a studied air of casualness.

They could still hear the roar of the speed-boat sweeping round the bay, and couldn't help following its gyrations with their eyes.

With an effort Michel spoke, feeling it was up to him to say something.

"I don't follow."

He had lowered his eyes, and now he noticed that Eva was wearing gold sandals and her toe-nails were enamelled dark crimson.

"Because I began at the end. Steady on, Michel; the head-waiter's watching. A month ago I learned quite suddenly that I had T.B. No, don't move. You needn't be anxious about the children. Evette will be cured in a few months' time. And your son within a year at most."

"What's this you're saying? . . . Listen, Eva! We absolutely must go somewhere else, to talk."

"Don't get up! And please don't raise your voice. When you've heard everything you'll see it's all quite simple, really. . . . When the doctor told me that, I was quite stunned at first. And then a sudden craving came over me to enjoy life while I could. I left the children behind. People will say I'm a heartless mother and all the rest of it, but I don't care."

"I see! You went off your head." Michel said it quite seriously; he suspected that the shock had really driven her crazy, and he was wondering if he should not exercise his rights and force her to come back with him to Saint-Raphael.

"Perhaps I did—or almost. But please listen to the rest of what I have to say."

One felt that she had given much thought to the interview, weighed every word that must be said. Lying back in the big chair, with her legs crossed, she was gazing at him curiously, with a new interest; almost she seemed to be wondering if she had really lived six years with this man.

"Remember, Michel, what my life's been like. Could you truthfully say that we fell in love with each other? I suppose you found me a change from the other marriageable girls you'd met, members of the wealthy families of La Rochelle. By local standards I was 'daring,' 'original,' a trifle 'fast.' Mind you, I'd left school at seventeen, and I was twenty when you married me. So I'd had three years of comparative freedom, quite cheerful years as I remember them, with heaps of dances, joy-rides to the small casinos on the coast in summer, balls at the Town Hall in the winter—and, of course, a few flirtations. The least a girl can expect, isn't it, if she's not too staid or unattractive?"

"But, good God, Eva . . . !" Michel began, rising from his chair. The setting of their conversation, the animated crowd and buzz of voices all around, seemed so grotesquely out of keeping with what Eva was saying—and with what he would presently have to say.

"Do please keep still. Have another whisky, if you feel like it. You'll notice, Michel, that I haven't said a word of reproach to you."

"You'd need some nerve to do that!"

"Let's put it this way ; we both made a mistake. The very first night, I think, you realized that . . . that I wasn't your type at all. Don't shake your head. There's no point, now, in humbugging ourselves. As for me, I did 'my wifely duty' as I believe they call it—and, to be frank, it always was a duty, not a pleasure. Really, the wonder is that, all the same, two children were born to us."

"That's enough!" It was as if a dentist's drill were jabbing at a nerve ; and its sound was the buzz of a speed-boat circling the bay, where that damned Englishman was showing off to the gaping fools on the terrace.

"Try to stick it out a few minutes more. I've nearly finished. . . . Anyhow, you must admit I gave you an easy time, and I never made scenes as a good many wives would have done. We'd scarcely been married a year when you started running after servant-girls, typists, any poor wretch of a girl you could get into your clutches, and with whom it didn't seem to matter what you did. Really, I wonder if poverty and helplessness haven't a sort of perverse attraction for you. . . ."

He blushed when he saw an elderly Englishman looking at him with an odd expression, and whispered to Eva :

"Not so loud!"

"Oh, no one's listening. Bring your chair closer if you like. Yes, that's better. . . . If I don't take precautions, I've two or at most three years' life before me ; and, even if I do, there's no certainty I'll recover. So I ask you just this, the only thing I'll ever ask you ; to give me my freedom. I promise to accept whatever conditions you impose. You can keep the two children if you wish to. (That shows you, doesn't it, the point I've reached !) If you prefer, we'll divorce ; or else we can have a judicial separation. I leave it to you. And there won't be the least publicity. Bob is going back to India next week ; I shall go by the same boat, and shall probably live at Simla." She was nervously fingering a big Indian bangle that Michel hadn't seen before, and her eyes were moist. "Well—I've finished."

Then she called the waiter and ordered a cocktail.

"You'll have another whisky, won't you ? Yes, do. . . . Waiter, a Rose and a whisky."

Her little laugh, when she saw Michel hastily finishing off what remained in his first glass, had a jarring note.

"You're just the same as ever, I see," she said.

Michel would have given much to be through with the next half-hour. The idea of making a decision then and there, on the crowded terrace of an hotel, seemed to him preposterous.

"Now let *me* say something, for a change," he began. "You must come back with me to Saint-Raphael. We'll have a serious talk, and then . . ."

She shook her head.

"No, Michel, I shan't go to Saint-Raphael. Unless you have me arrested by the police, I'll be leaving with Bob in half an hour. We came from San Remo by sea. There's a cool breeze in the evenings and I must be back before it starts. That's why I fixed our appointment for three sharp. Perhaps you feel I shouldn't have brought Bob with me. As a matter of fact, I thought it the decent thing to do, a proof of friendliness. . . . And we'd better part friends, hadn't we?"

"I really believe you're completely crazy."

"You've said that already. Well, you're wrong." She was showing more animation; feelings she had intended to repress were welling up. "But, suppose I have gone crazy, what's the cause? That horrible, sinister—yes, sinister!—house of yours in La Rochelle. Do you remember how your father refused to let us go away, even for our honeymoon—because it was the 'cod season'? Your 'cod seasons'! Your precious 'ovoids'! And there was I, in that mausoleum of yours, treated like an outsider, almost a pariah—for none of you ever regarded me as a member of the family. I defy you to say the contrary!"

"Well, if you hadn't persisted in seeing people like Frédéric . . . Ah, that reminds me. Don't you think it was rather . . . rather tactless of you to write to him before writing to me? It was only by chance, through Philippe, that I learned you'd moved to San Remo."

She shrugged disdainfully, and lit another cigarette, on which her lips left two red smudges.

"Just now," Michel went on, "you were talking about servant-

girls and typists. Well, what about *you* ? Can you assure me there was never anything between you and Frédéric ? ”

A home-thrust ! That should get her on the raw ! He was paying her back in her own coin. Forgetting where they were, he had raised his voice.

“ Frédéric never wanted it , ” she said regretfully.

“ What’s that you’re saying ? ”

“ I mean that, if he’d wanted, I’d have gladly been his mistress. In which case I’d have told you about it, needless to say . ”

How long was it since Oscar Donadieu’s death ? Less than a year. And now a Donadieu—for she was one by marriage, and bore the name—was confessing brazenly that . . . And, to make things still worse, he, Michel, couldn’t work up any real indignation. True, the setting told against it, what with the heat, the glare from the sea, the persistent buzz of that infernal speed-boat in the offing. . . .

“ Well then, Michel ? ”

“ Well then—what ? ”

“ You agree, don’t you ? ”

“ The family will never hear of a divorce.”

“ Then let’s content ourselves with a separation.”

“ How about your English friend ? ”

Her eyelashes fluttered.

“ It won’t make any difference. Anyhow, he couldn’t marry me. And, even if he could, I’d never agree to it.”

“ But, good heavens . . . ! ” he exploded.

She guessed what was in his mind. That, in that case, she’d be going to India as a . . .

“ Yes, I’ll be a woman on her own. There’s no need to use an ugly term, is there ? Anyhow, you needn’t worry about ‘ the family honour . ’ I shall resume my maiden name.”

She was watching her husband, and suddenly she felt a qualm of disgust. It was as if he exhaled the fetid atmosphere of that hateful house at La Rochelle ; it hovered round him, an almost visible miasma.

“ Let’s get it over. I haven’t said anything about the financial

side of it, as there's really nothing to say. I give up any claims I may have, and I ask nothing from you."

"These matters should be settled in writing, before a notary."

"All right. Have the document drawn up."

"Your signature will be required."

She called the waiter.

"Ask one of the pages to come, please."

When the boy came, she told him to bring the Cannes directory. Michel looked quite startled.

"I say, what's the idea?"

The speed-boat had stopped at last and the Englishman could be seen stepping on to the landing-stage, a tall, clean-cut figure against the blue of sea and sky.

"Wait."

Eva fluttered the pages of the directory, nicked with a red finger-nail one of the names in a column.

"Don't forget the name: Maître Berthier, notary. I'll see him at once and give him a power of attorney. Then you can fix things up with him, to your best advantage."

Burns was approaching. With a smile and a wave of her hand she made him understand he was to leave them together for a few minutes more.

"So that's that, Michel. Sorry to have rushed you like this, but there was no help for it. Curious, isn't it, the way things have turned out? If Jean hadn't had that go of bronchitis I suppose I'd have carried on for another two or three years without knowing how it was with me. We'd have gone on living together, you and I, almost like two strangers under the same roof. Really, we're well out of it, both of us, when all's said and done; don't you agree? You're a free man again."

"A very sick man, too," he mumbled.

"Rubbish! You fell ill—'went sick,' they call it, don't they?—because you were in a nasty fix over that girl, and your being ill made things easier. When it's all forgotten you'll be fit again. People like you are never really ill."

"What on earth do you mean?" Michel sounded quite aggrieved.

"Don't be vexed," she smiled. "Let's part on good terms.

But the truth is, a man like you, the complete egoist, is trouble-proof. When anything seriously threatens your peace of mind, your body sets up what the doctors call—yes, I've learned quite a lot of their jargon lately—a defensive reflex; your heart begins to wobble at the convenient moment. . . . And, do you know, I wouldn't mind betting that you're already in tow with another girl—even younger than the last one, isn't she?"

Afterwards he regretted the remark, but for the moment his one idea was to wound her.

"Yes, how right father was!"

"Eh?"

"When he told me I was a fool to marry your mother's daughter."

Eva stood up, the cigarette between her lips, and looked down on him disdainfully. It struck him that she seemed taller than in the past; but this might be due to the costume she was wearing.

Curly she said "Good-bye," then, in a few lithe strides, had crossed the terrace to the road where Burns stood waiting. He gave a quick glance at Michel, while she said something in his ear.

Michel supposed she was telling him that they had had it out between them, all said that needed to be said. The Englishman seemed to hesitate, and made some remark to his companion, probably about paying for the drinks. But Eva took his arm peremptorily and led him towards the landing-stage.

"Waiter! How much do I owe you?"

The waiter produced a bill, on seeing which Michel exclaimed:

"Two hundred and fifteen francs! How do you make that?"

"The lady and gentleman had lunch here. I thought . . ."

With the result that Michel had to pay for his wife's and Captain Burns's luncheon.

When the car reached Saint-Raphael, at five, the beach was still gay with bathing-costumes of every shape and hue. Michel's humour was all the worse as Baptiste had taken the wrong turning and returned by the upper road, along the Corniche ledge, and heights always made Michel dizzy.

'He had a glimpse of his brother's boat, an oddly shaped craft

but seaworthy it seemed, bobbing on the ripples, resplendent in a coat of scarlet paint.

Mme Donadieu was sitting in the garden with her friends the Krugers, who were still unaware, or discreetly feigned to be unaware, of the fact that Martine had just had a baby.

Martine's window stood open and her room was bathed in the golden glow of a Riviera afternoon.

To avoid meeting the Krugers, Michel slipped in by the back door, and fell to roaming from room to room, at a loose end. Brooding on what had passed between him and his wife, he found it was her reference to Frédéric that rankled most. What was that beastly thing she'd said in a regretful tone? "Frédéric never wanted it!" Otherwise, she implied, she'd have . . .

But had she told the truth? Even so, it was little less galling. His shirt was soaked with sweat; he went upstairs to change it, and decided, while he was about it, to change his socks and shoes as well. But all the time he was doing this his thoughts kept harking back to Frédéric, and linking up with other half-forgotten grievances, till he felt an uncontrollable desire to vent his spite on somebody or something. The aspect of his bedroom sickened him; never before had he realized its ugliness and bleakness. Abruptly he got up from the bed on which he had been sitting, went to Martine's door, and knocked.

"Come in."

She was sitting up in bed, her child asleep in the cradle, and the nurse ironing baby-linen. To Martine's disappointment, the doctor had decided, after the milk-test, that a wet-nurse was required. A swarthy young peasant-woman with an incipient moustache had been procured locally, and since then there had been no respite from her deep Southern voice.

"Where's Philippe?" asked Michel as he sat down beside the bed.

"He's gone to Monte Carlo. The Grindorges have just come there for a few days, and they asked him to spend the evening with them. Isn't it lucky he brought his dinner-jacket with him this trip?"

An unfortunate remark. The grievance against Frédéric was

still simmering, and it annoyed Michel to think that Frédéric's son was going to dine at some smart restaurant with those rich Parisians, who had sunk a million francs and more in the subsidiary company.

"Well, I must say you *do* look peevish!" Martine exclaimed. She was wearing a quaint little bed-jacket that gave her the air of a young matron in a musical comedy.

"Do I?"

"You do. What's wrong?"

He shrugged his shoulders. What was wrong? He was in a vile humour, that was all he could have said. Instinctively he turned the conversation to the object of his rancour.

"Does Philippe see much of his father?"

"I don't think so. Anyhow, he never mentions him to me."

"I wonder . . ."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing." He guessed that the more evasive he appeared, the more questions she would ask. "Anyhow," he added, watching her from the corner of an eye, "this isn't the moment to talk to you of such things."

"What do you mean? What's happened?"

"Nothing's happened. But I've been thinking a good deal lately, and checking up on certain matters . . ."

"Look here! Are you trying to tease me—or what?" She had been looking exceptionally cheerful when he came in; now she was eyeing her brother apprehensively.

"I've been thinking about Frédéric. And about father's death. Do you really think he committed suicide?"

"No."

Suicide was indeed the last thing one would expect of such a man as Oscar Donadieu.

"Exactly!"

"Exactly—what? Don't be so tiresome!"

"To my mind it's equally absurd to suppose there was an accident. Father knew every inch of the ground and, in spite of his age, he was very steady on his feet. One thing's certain; he couldn't have fallen over under the influence of drink, as he never touched anything but water at the Club."

"Couldn't he have had a stroke?" Martine suggested.

"A stroke that came at the precise moment when he was on the edge of the harbour? That's straining coincidence a bit far, isn't it?" A sound was still buzzing in his ears, the stridence of a speed-boat careering round the bay, with that supercilious young Englishman at the wheel! "I know I really shouldn't talk to you about these things—but I'm so terribly cut off from everyone. There are times when I feel I'm the only one of us who gives another thought to our father—who remembers he's a Donadieu. If you want to know what I think, Jeannet let us down; he should have made a closer enquiry into Frédéric's movements. After all, we've only Frédéric's word for it that he parted company with father at the corner of the Rue Gargoulleau. What Jeannet should have done—"

Martine turned towards the nurse.

"Marie, will you finish off your ironing in the bathroom?"

"But there isn't any wall-plug in the bathroom for my iron."

"Please go there for a moment, anyhow."

"Very well, Madame."

She turned to Michel.

"Why are you saying all this *now*?"

He was not prepared for the look she gave him, and he lowered his eyes.

"Well?" she asked. "Won't you answer?"

"Really I couldn't say. I just happened to be thinking of it."

"What's Eva done to you?"

"What's that? You . . . you knew about it?"

That made him still more furious. Everyone seemed to have known—except himself. And through Frédéric, naturally!

"What's she decided to do?"

"She's going to India."

"Did she say something to you about Frédéric?"

Michel realized now that he'd gone too far. The question was how to beat a dignified retreat. He walked to the window and gazed at the beach, the harbour, the esplanade with its trim rows of shade-trees.

"She didn't say anything about him; but I drew my own con-

clusions, and I'd every right to do so. . . . I forgot for a moment that your husband is his son. Very sorry, and all that."

He took a step towards the door.

"Michel!"

"Yes. What is it?"

"Why did you choose today to tell me—all this you've been saying?"

"Didn't you hear me say I was sorry? Don't let's mention it again."

His hand lay on the door-knob.

"Michel!"

The door was opening.

"Michel! I wonder if you realize what a nasty piece of work you are!"

He swung round, wounded to the quick, and shot a furious glance at his sister. Never before had she spoken to him in that tone. He had always looked on her as a mere child, a silly girl who had found nothing better to do than to fling herself into the arms of a bounder like Philippe.

As he walked down the stairs he felt lonelier, more cut off from the world than ever. A drone of women's voices, with occasional ripples of slightly affected laughter, came to him from the garden, where his mother and the Krugers were exchanging Riviera small-talk.

On his way through the kitchen to the back door he caught himself regretting that the servant was a woman of fifty. And when presently, still nursing his grievances as he sauntered along the sea-front, he noticed that he was passing the *Continental*, he hardly hesitated a moment before stepping into the lobby.

"Is Monsieur Freddie in?"

He only knew the young man's Christian name, but that evidently sufficed, for the porter promptly ran his eyes over the key rack.

"I think he's out. Are you by any chance Monsieur Emile? He said that if you came you were to be shown up to his room."

So Freddie had remembered, and was playing up! All the same,

Michel had half a mind to back out of it now he was standing in the spacious lobby, with its tubbed palms, pages in blue uniform hovering in the background, the lift-boy at his post. Somehow his project seemed out of keeping. . . . But then he heard the porter say :

“Page, take this gentleman to Room 73.”

It was too late to draw back. A few moments later he was shown into a rather dark room that smelt of Virginia cigarette-smoke and lavender water.

“Shall I open the shutters, sir ?”

“No, thanks.” Michel felt in his trouser-pocket and failed to find any small change. “I’ll see you on my way out.”

It was a large, airy room. A stack of pigskin suitcases occupied one corner. There was the gentle drone of an electric fan, and the low bed, spread with a silk counterpane, looked so inviting that he was tempted to lie down on it and sleep his troubles off. He couldn’t have wished for better conditions ; here he had a feeling of being worlds away from everything and everyone ; from the villa and La Rochelle, from Eva, Frédéric, Philippe, and the Donadieus ; out of time and out of space. The furniture was nondescript, comfortable without pretentiousness, the wall-paper and curtains in discreetly subdued tones. In fact, had it not been so silly, Michel would certainly have had a nap.

His eyes fell on a small enamelled plaque let into the wall, on which, aligned beside three bell-pushes, were three tiny figures : a tail-coated head-waiter, a valet with a striped waistcoat, and a coquettish, white-aproned chambermaid. He pressed the third button and heard a faint click ; the tell-tale lamp in the passage, over the door of 73, had lit up.

There was no certainty it would be Nina ; she had told him she had some hours off every afternoon, when another girl took her place.

He posted himself near the door and presently heard footsteps in a passage at right angles to the one by which he had entered. At last there was a light tap on the door.

“Come in,” he said in a low tone.

She was surprised to find the room almost in darkness, took a

few steps forward, then halted. Meanwhile Michel had quietly slipped behind and bolted the door.

"Did you ring, sir?" she asked uncertainly, puzzled at seeing nobody in the room.

When, looking round, she discovered Michel, she couldn't decide for a moment whether to laugh or to scream. He had never seen her before in this attire, with a short black skirt, white cap and apron.

"Gosh! Where have you sprung from?"

"Ssh! Don't talk so loud!"

He stood between her and the door. Suddenly he gripped her by the shoulders and forced her back towards the bed, panting in her ear:

"Keep quiet! Not a sound, or . . ."

"Leave go! You're hurting me."

The queer thing was that his thoughts were elsewhere—with Eva and her Englishman, the speed-boat, Frédéric. He hardly knew what he was doing, why he was here. Yet, all the time, another portion of his brain was active, thinking coherently, or almost so. Thus he was quite aware that the young man from the Arsenal, Nina's fiancé, was to arrive next day. And he was wondering if, after what was happening now, he should wait for her as usual at the service door and take her to the cabaret.

He was conscious that Nina, after her first struggles—he had needed to exert his strength—was yielding. A look of resignation had settled on her face, and she turned her eyes towards the wall so as not to see him. . . .

Standing beside the bed, he looked down on her; she remained so still, not even troubling to smooth out her dress, that he had a moment of panic.

"What's wrong, Ninouchka? I know I've acted like a brute, but . . . I simply couldn't help it. Do, please, say something."

She hadn't fainted. But she was very tired, and so much revolted that she felt quite sick. At last she rose, very slowly, and gazed at him, with a look of cold disgust.

"Ninouche! Ninouche darling!"

"Aw, cut it out!" she snarled, and he was struck for the first time by the coarseness of her voice.

"Please don't be angry. If you knew how I've been feeling all this afternoon . . ."

"Climbing down, are you?"

She switched on the lamp on the dressing-table and settled her hair. Then she went to the bed and tidied it.

"I suppose you fixed it up with that gigolo who has this room," she said scornfully. "I'll give him a piece of my mind when I see him next."

"I assure you, Nina . . ."

"Let me tell you this; you're a swine. But there! I acted proper silly, I should have known you'd be up to some dirty trick. I could see from the start you wasn't . . . normal."

Michel stared uncomfortably at the floor.

"Well, I'm off," she said after a moment.

"What . . . what are you going to do?"

"Getting cold feet, eh?" Unconsciously she was rubbing her bruised shoulder.

"Listen, Nina! It's just struck me that . . ." Uncertain how to put it, he produced his wallet and began rustling the notes inside it.

"Don't trouble! You ain't got no more than I have."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean that everyone at the *Boule Rouge* knows you're on your uppers. You've been running a slate for the last month."

"That's why . . ."

"Oh, shut up! I've a mighty good mind to go and tell the police on you. It'd serve you bloody well right."

With a last vicious glance at him she walked out. Michel sat down on the bed to give her time to move away, and himself time to steady his nerves. Then, composing his features to an air of dignity, he, too, left the room, crossed the lobby under the pages' eyes, and began walking, not towards the Villa des Tamaris, but in the opposite direction.

VII

ONE old custom, anyhow, persisted. Whereas on weekdays everybody was up and dressed quite early, no fixed time for rising was observed on Sundays. Most of the family slept late, and when they rose there was an unusual commotion in the house; doors banging, taps running, calls from room to room. And the smell of early breakfasts hung longer in the air, mingling with steam from baths and whiffs of *eau-de-Cologne*.

“Hurry up, mother! It’s ten.”

“Just a moment.”

After glancing into Martine’s room, Mme Donadieu joined Philippe in the hall. She was out of breath, her face lavishly powdered.

“Is the car there?” she asked.

“Yes, it’s been waiting with the engine running for five minutes.”

The church was only three hundred yards away. But Mme Donadieu’s legs had always been capricious; sometimes so swollen that she could just hobble along with the aid of a stick, at other times in quite good trim. Her children asserted that their condition depended on her mood, and what she wanted to do.

A Sunday calm brooded on the streets, and they seemed even brighter than usual, as there was more space for the sun to play on. The car drew up outside the church, and Baptiste got out and opened the door.

The church was very full, and slanting sunbeams, tinged by the stained glass, chequered the aisles. Standing on the right of the altar, the priest was intoning the first prayer, to the accompaniment of discreetly modulated chords on the organ.

“This way, mother.”

As they settled into two vacant chairs, the priest moved to the other side of the altar and everyone stood up. Philippe noticed the Kruger family just in front; they were elaborately dressed, and they, too, exhaled as it were a special “Sunday” smell.

Chairs scraped on the stone flags, and the sermon began. Philippe’s behaviour was exemplary; unconstrained, but not irrever-

ent. He stood up, sat down, and knelt, at the right moments, crossed himself, and wore throughout a thoughtful, serious expression.

For a while his eyes, following his mother-in-law's, lingered on Kiki, who had entered the church, accompanied by Edmond, still later than his mother. But it was not his lateness that had struck Mme Donadieu; it was the boy's demeanour and the look on his face.

One might have said that the Kruger girls, for instance, showed all the signs of normal piety. As for Philippe, his bearing was suitable, one of polite indifference, no more. And there, a few rows in front of him, was Kiki in the grip of a religious ecstasy, induced, no doubt, by the atmosphere of the church, the ritual glamour, the shafts of rosy light falling from the windows, deep tones of the organ, incense . . .

"You saw Kiki?" Mme Donadieu whispered.

"Yes."

Both felt surprised, almost embarrassed, when at the very moment they were talking of him, though he couldn't possibly have overheard, the boy looked quickly round, blushed as he caught his mother's eye—and resumed his usual, rather sullen look.

He was still in their minds when the service ended. The blue car was waiting at the church gate, and the people streaming out had to make their way round it.

Bells were ringing. Banners waving, an athletic club was marching down the street. Perhaps because she had been thinking of Kiki, Mme Donadieu said :

"Have you any idea why Michel went away so suddenly?"

On the previous day Michel had left for Vittel, saying that his doctor advised him to take the cure there. Everyone had realized that he had something on his mind, and also that it was wiser not to question him.

"I suppose he was more upset than we thought by his meeting with Eva." As a matter of fact, Philippe could have told her the true reason; he had heard about the Nina episode.

They were passing the bandstand on the esplanade, and Mme Donadieu's eyes fell on some empty chairs.

"Let's sit down here for a bit." When they were seated, she put another question. "What exactly have they decided to do? Michel wouldn't tell me anything. He only talked about a misunderstanding, and Eva's health."

"Oh, they've separated for good." He noticed that Mme Donadieu showed no consternation, and indeed little surprise. "Eva's going to India with an English army officer. The children are staying in Switzerland, I think."

Philippe could have sworn a vague smile hovered on his mother-in-law's lips. Flecks of sunlight glowed on her white flannel skirt. A mother-o'-pearl lorgnette dangled on her chest, and streaks of powder marked the crannies of her neck.

Both were in a brown study, following up their respective thoughts. The villa was only a hundred yards away and the garden-chairs were much more comfortable than the public seats they now were occupying. But it was quite an adventure for Mme Donadieu to be mixing with the crowd on the sea-front, and she had no immediate desire to move.

"Michel, I should say, has the worst look-out of all of us," she remarked. There was little compassion in her voice; she was merely making an observation, trying to understand something which had always puzzled her. "It's his father's fault really," she continued. "I always told him one shouldn't treat a man of over thirty, with a family, as if he were a schoolboy."

Never had she breathed a word of this to her sons or daughters; Philippe was the only person with whom she felt she could be frank, or relatively frank.

"Much good it's done him!" she exclaimed, still thinking of her husband. "Look how things are today! Eva's decamped to India, Michel doesn't know what to do with himself, and Kiki—well, he's such a queer boy, one doesn't know what to make of him. Tell me, Philippe, what's your idea of that tutor of his?"

"I've a feeling that he and Kiki get on a bit too well together. Really, one would think they were the same age. . . ."

That was as far as he thought fit to go—the merest hint. With another sigh Mme Donadieu rose heavily from her chair.

"Well, we'd better be moving. What time are your friends coming?"

"About one, they said."

"I'll have to see about the lunch."

On their return to the house, Philippe went upstairs to his wife.

"Where have you and mamma been all this time?"

"Your mother thought she'd sit down for a bit on the Front."

"What did she talk to you about?"

"Oh, nothing in particular. She wanted to know how things stand between Michel and Eva."

A few minutes later she saw him changing his tie and studying his face in the glass.

"For Madame Grindorge's benefit?" she smiled.

"Don't be so absurd!" Still, in a way she was right. Young Mme Grindorge, whose dresses never seemed to fit, had a way of comparing Philippe with her husband, when they were together—to the disadvantage of the latter. And unconsciously Grindorge did all that was needed to increase his wife's admiration for the younger man.

"You heard what Philippe said?" or "Make yourself more amiable to Philippe. Sometimes you're quite short with him."

The truth was she had no intention of being "short," but there were times when the way her husband ran after a man much his junior, and accepted all his opinions blindly, got on her nerves.

Since the gramophone venture, when Philippe had put him in the way of making sixty thousand francs without the least risk, and since the Donadieu subsidiary had been floated on Philippe's initiative, Grindorge had got into the habit of ringing him up several times a day.

"Hullo? That you, Philippe? I've just been offered a block of Rand Mines shares. What's your idea about them for a rise?"

Philippe never hesitated—that was where his strength lay—and he gave a categorical reply.

"Do you really think so?"

"There's not the slightest doubt."

The Grindorges had made the trip to Monte Carlo with the

object of seeing something of him, and now they were on their way to the Villa des Tamaris in their car.

Mme Donadieu had taken the opportunity of inviting the Krugers as well, and was determined to make the luncheon a success. A waiter had been hired for the occasion; also silver plate, of which there wasn't enough in the villa.

Philippe smiled when he saw the youngest of the Kruger girls, who was greatly smitten with him, cast a sour look at Mme Grindorge; for it had taken her only ten minutes to understand. . . .

He was in great form. After lunch he made excuses to the Krugers and, asking his two friends to come with him, went to Martine's room, where the fact of there being the four of them together once again revived to some extent the atmosphere of Paris.

Martine was still confined to her bed, but she was getting back her strength. She proudly exhibited her baby from every angle, and coaxed the Grindorges into declaring that he was the image of his father. Meanwhile, through the open window they could hear the Krugers chattering away—except the youngest girl, who was sulking because of Philippe's absence.

“Will you be staying much longer at Monte Carlo?”

“No, we leave tomorrow, and we'll have to take Philippe back with us; there's a lot of work waiting for him.”

Mme Donadieu's voice, in the garden below, was that of a woman in high good-humour. This was the life she should always have lived! And to think she'd had to wait till she was getting on for sixty—and had Philippe for a son-in-law!

“One day,” she was saying, “I'll ask Mrs Gabell to tea again, and you must meet her. She's such a character, I'm sure you'll be thrilled. The tragedy is, I have to leave next week. It's my other children's turn to come here for their holiday, and I'll have to get back into harness.”

With Philippe, naturally; the two were yoke-fellows. They'd attend office together daily while Marthe and her husband made holiday on the Riviera.

There was not the smallest cloud in the sky all day. Mme Donadieu was in one of those moods of rare felicity which one would

have go on for ever, and she refused to hear of her guests leaving.

“Yes, yes, you really must stay to tea. I’ve got some perfectly scrumptious little cakes, and I want you to try them.”

The Grindorges were equally reluctant to make a move. After tea Mme Grindorge took her husband aside, and when they had confabulated for some moments, he went up to Philippe.

“Ask your mother-in-law to come and dine with us at the casino. Yes, you simply must; it’s our last day.”

Mme Donadieu accepted, and Philippe went upstairs and informed Martine, rather shamefacedly, that the four of them were dining out. To his surprise, she showed no resentment. The sun was setting in a golden haze, and not a breath of wind stirred the trees.

Neither Kiki nor Edmond had been seen since the morning service, but no one troubled about them.

The dinner-party lasted late and, after it, Grindorge took his guests for a twenty-mile drive along the coast and a final glass of champagne in a new cabaret he had heard of at Saint-Tropez.

Hanging on André’s arm, Nina had been trudging since two o’clock along the dusty, shadeless road that led to Fréjus, where a “popular fête” was taking place. Now and again, when she saw a well-dressed man of Michel’s build approaching, she gave a start, and squeezed her companion’s arm more tightly.

“I’ve asked for a transfer to our Wireless Section,” he told her, “and, if I fix it, I’ll try to get posted at Saint-Raphael. That’ll be fine, won’t it?”

He was puzzled by the change in her; she was at once much more tractable and more emotional. When his train came in at ten that morning, she was on the platform, and had promptly flung herself into his arms, without a word, weeping profusely.

It was flattering, of course, but he felt foolish, with so many people looking on.

“Steady on, Nina. Everybody’s staring.”

Now it occurred to him that she had told him hardly anything about herself.

"What sort of time have you been having these last four months? I suppose Saint-Raphael's very full now?"

"Oh, not so full as all that."

"Had a lot of work at the hotel?"

"I've the whole second floor as usual, but I can manage."

"Done much dancing?"

"No, I ain't been to a dance-hall twice since you was here last."

That was true. For them the *Boule Rouge* didn't count as a dance-hall; it came in a different category.

"You've not done the dirty on me while I've been away?" he grinned. He was only teasing; really he felt quite confident.

She gave nervous glances round her as they entered a big room, in which a man in his shirt-sleeves, standing on a table, was playing a big accordion. Suppose some girl who knew about her were here, and started talking . . . ?

He held her so closely as they danced that their cheeks touched, and suddenly he felt a warm drop fall on his hand. Nina was crying and smiling at the same time.

"Don't look at me like that! I'm not crying, really. It's just being with you again that makes me feel all funny-like."

She caught sight of Jenny, another chambermaid at the *Continental*, who knew all, or almost all, about her affair with "M. Emile." Seeing the anxious look in Nina's eyes, Jenny smiled and made a little, reassuring gesture.

The room was very hot. Nina drank lemonade laced with crème-de-menthe, and very soon she was perspiring freely, the light dress clinging to her supple body. The young man began to show signs of emotion.

"How about . . . going somewhere else?" he suggested with a sheepish grin.

"What's the hurry? Let's have another dance first." She kept on staving off the moment, till at last he couldn't help noticing it.

"Well, I must say you don't seem very keen. . . . I suppose you're in one of your moods."

They had danced twenty times before she finally consented to leave the hall. They walked quickly down the street, Nina making the pace. Her nerves were on edge, and she had a moment of

panic when they turned into a small hotel behind the Town Hall.

Still, with André it was quite plain sailing. She drew the curtains of the bedroom, turned down the sheets herself, and saw that the door was securely bolted. Then, as naturally as if she were by herself, she undressed, not forgetting, after taking off her shoes and stockings, to rub her feet, which were aching after so many dances.

Meanwhile André smoked a cigarette and went on with a yarn he had started on their way to the hotel.

And then, for the third time in the day, she started crying, foolishly, for no reason, and it went on so long that André lost patience.

“But—blast it all!—ain’t you glad to see me back? What do you mean by blubbing like this, I’d like to know.”

“It’s nothing really. Don’t take no notice.”

“‘Nothing,’ you call it? Do you think it’s nice for me, when I get five days’ leave, to see you carrying on like a bloomin’ waterfall?”

Presently he fell asleep; he had been in the train all night. He was still sleeping when night fell; beside him on the bed, Nina was sitting up, gazing listlessly into the dusk, or, sometimes, casting a quick glance at his face.

The room was pitch dark when he awoke and asked sleepily:

“What’s time?”

“Close on nine.”

“Damn it! You might have woke me. We’ll be late for the pictures.”

Meanwhile, at Vittel Michel was vainly trying to stave off disagreeable thoughts. Still, he consoled himself, what would she gain by giving him away? In any case, she hadn’t any proofs. And, if she didn’t really want it, why have come with him every evening to the *Boule Rouge*?

It was the second Sunday on which the Olsens, who had recently bought a car, were going out for the day. Marthe was driving, with her husband beside her and their small boy, Maurice, behind.

This time they ventured farther than on the previous Sunday, and went to Royan, where they lunched on the terrace of a restaurant overlooking the sea.

"Philippe said you should buy a lighter suit," Marthe reminded her husband. "Yours are much too dark and heavy for the Riviera. How about a light-grey flannel?"

"It would be absurd ordering a new suit just for a fortnight."

"But you'll be able to use it again when we go next year."

At the age of thirty-two Olsen had the reluctance of an old man for spending money, and his thriftiness was of a systematic, not to say scientific order. He was always well dressed, but he took the utmost care of his clothes, sparing no pains to reduce their daily wear and tear. And he always sent for catalogues from all parts of France, and compared prices, before buying the smallest object for the household or his personal use.

"I'm pretty sure," Marthe said, "that mother's having the time of her life at Saint-Raphael. When's Philippe due back?"

"In three days' time."

"You're quite sure there wasn't any . . . any catch in that Agreement?"

For Marthe was still suspicious. It was all very well, this windfall which, thanks to Philippe, had swelled the Donadieu coffers at an opportune moment. It enabled each group of the family to spend more freely and enjoy the luxury of a holiday in the South. But Marthe couldn't get rid of a suspicion there must be a "catch" in it.

"Maître Goussard assures me that the Agreement's quite in order. Anyhow, I've no fears; I shall know how to safeguard my interests if need arises. . . . By the way, did I tell you the latest news?"

"No. What is it?"

"It's about Frédéric. His cinema's in liquidation. And, as he can't raise a penny in La Rochelle—I doubt if he can even afford a furnished room—the general idea is that he'll be clearing out of the town."

"Do you think Philippe will offer to help him?"

"If he does, I'm certain Frédéric will refuse."

"Even if he offers him a job in one of our offices? Look here, supposing he does that, you really must put your foot down. Rightly or wrongly, I've always regarded Dargens as our evil genius. Remember father's death; Frédéric was the last person seen with him before he died."

But soon the scene before them drew their thoughts off such depressing subjects. Marthe nudged her husband to point out an enormously fat woman in a red bathing-dress; then her attention was caught by a car of the same make as theirs, but with a streamlined body; then her little son started asking to be allowed to go and paddle. And so they settled down contentedly to the mild delights of a small family at the seaside on a fine Sunday afternoon.

"Dear Monsieur Dargens,—I hope you will forgive me for not writing sooner, after all the kindness you have shown me. I will not try to make excuses, I'm afraid I haven't any. I'll only say I found it difficult to collect my thoughts—that dreadful time at La Rochelle, when you were such a splendid friend in need, still seems so near."

"When I got to Paris I went straight to Mme Jane's hat-shop in the Faubourg St Honoré and, thanks to your letter of course, she was kindness itself. Too kind, I'm afraid, for she engaged me to serve in the shop from the very next morning—and you can imagine what a hash I made of it! Even now, when I see myself in one of the mirrors (this shop is full of mirrors), I realize what a dowdy I must look, so countrified and gauche."

"I am still rather scared of the customers. Luckily it is now the off-season for hats, and most of the regular customers are away from Paris. So Mme Jane has time to show me the ropes, and I think I'm making progress."

"I can't say how I feel; I seem to have given up thinking—what with all the noise and bustle, and this great change in my life. Now and then, when I have a moment to myself, I start brooding; but almost always one of the other girls comes up and makes a joke or scolds me, and I have to laugh. In fact, I can't think what you put in that letter to make Mme Jane, and the staff as well, so nice to me!"

"I didn't even have to hunt round for lodgings. The forewoman came with me and we found a room at once. She has given me all

sorts of tips, and just now she is making a black silk dress for me, like the other girls wear.

"My address is 28, Boulevard des Batignolles, so if ever you feel inclined to drop me a line, you know where to send it. I cannot say how grateful I am. I feel like a different person, and if it wasn't that I'm always thinking of poor father, I could settle down, I think, to quite a happy life.

"I thought of writing to him. Only he's that obstinate, it would do no good; he wouldn't even read my letter. I am afraid he is dreadfully unhappy—and all on my account.

"Do you think he will be allowed to go back to his job on the railway? How will he manage about the house and his meals, now that he is by himself? If by any chance you come across him, I do wish you would try to explain things. You would know better than I how to put it.

"That is all—except that I want to say again how terribly grateful I am for all your kindness.

"Odette.

"P.S.—Please don't show this letter to M. Philippe, or tell him anything, unless he asks about me."

That was a curious Sunday morning for Frédéric Dargens. At nine he was in a shabby hotel on the sea-front, packing his few belongings in two handsome leather suitcases with his initials stamped on them—last relics of his bygone affluence.

When a young chambermaid brought his morning coffee, he had seen her look of admiration directed at his silk pyjamas and his dressing-gown, and had smiled wryly.

On coming downstairs he said to the proprietor of the hotel : "I'm taking the eleven train. I shall be back in half an hour or so. Will it do if I leave my things in my room till then ?"

"All right. But don't be too long; somebody may want the room."

"Thanks. I'll be as quick as I can."

People were on their way to a protestant church near by. Motor-buses were rumbling past, unusually crowded as a travelling circus had pitched its tent in the centre of the Place d'Armes.

Frédéric made his way to the outskirts of the town and entered the road, bordered by cottages, in which Baillet lived. Having found the railwayman's cottage, not without some difficulty, he halted at the garden gate, uncertain of his next move, as there was no bell. A woman standing at the door of the next house called to him.

"I think he's at the back, cutting grass for his rabbits. You've only got to open the gate; it's never locked."

He walked round to the back of the cottage, as Odette had done when she came home for the last time. The walls of the yard were lined shoulder-high with hutches, with rabbits in them nibbling green-stuff. There was a smell in the air that took Frédéric back to his childhood.

But he still could see no sign of Baillet. In the centre of the back wall was a small, rickety gate, and beyond it lay a stretch of waste land, used by the garrison as a parade-ground. On going up to the gate he saw a man with his back to him on the far side of the parade-ground, cutting grass, and he walked quickly across the intervening space.

"Monsieur Baillet, I believe?"

The man straightened up and examined Frédéric with mistrust. He was wearing an old, ragged suit, down-at-heel felt slippers, and a railwayman's cap.

"And what do you want of Monsieur Baillet? Anyhow, who told you I was here?"

He had a small sickle in his hand, and beside him a basket half-full of grass and chicory leaves.

"Sorry if I'm disturbing you, but . . ."

"You ain't a journalist, by any chance?" Baillet was looking more and more suspicious, his small eyes screwed up under the bushy brows.

"No, I've nothing to do with the Press."

"I asked that because I've had two of 'em round already. . . . Ah, that's it, you're one of them canvassers for the elections." It was Frédéric's clothes that irritated him most. He'd had enough of "toffs" and their ways. "Well, if that's it," he added truculently, "I tell you straight it ain't no good trying to talk me round. I'm a communist, and a communist I stay."

Frédéric guessed that he had come on a fool's errand. From talk in the cafés he had learnt that the railway company had refused to take Baillet back, but, as he was only a year off the retiring age, had advised him to put in for a pension.

Recently he had started rabbit-breeding, and never left the cottage except on Saturdays, when he attended the Party meeting at a tavern on the water-front. His comrades may not have taken him very seriously, but there was no question he viewed himself as a martyr. He would stalk into the room with the light of combat in his eyes, and only spoke to voice categorical opinions, of the naïvest description. It was rumoured that he was a heavy drinker, and certainly he had the drunkard's habit of making the same remark over and over again with an inspired air.

"I know what I'm talking about," he would say sternly to an interruptor, "and Baillet ain't one to change his mind once he knows. . . ." Or: "I don't say you ain't men. But there's men and men and, though it's I who says it, to do what I did you got, to be a Roman." Evidently he had heard someone talking of the stoic valour of the ancient Romans, and "Roman" was for him synonymous with "hero." Or: "If other folks had the guts to act like me, there'd be no more exploitation of the workers, no more poverty."

Frédéric was half inclined to leave the man without saying what he had meant to say. Baillet still held his sickle, and his expression was deliberately menacing.

"Please listen, Monsieur Baillet."

"Why should I listen to the likes of you?"

"Couldn't we have a quiet talk, just for a minute or two?"

"Talk away!" He feigned not to understand that Frédéric would have preferred their moving to the cottage.

"It so happens that I can give you some news of your daughter, and . . ."

Decidedly the railwayman had developed a taste for theatrical effects. With a sweeping gesture he pointed, not to the gate by which Frédéric had come, but to the trees bordering the parade-ground, saying:

"That's your way!"

"Let's talk seriously, please. I know you haven't been drinking —it's too early. I've this to tell you. Odette is very unhappy."

"Ain't I told you that's the road, yonder, by them trees. I don't want to hear none of your talk, and that's an end of it. Or do you think that because you wear fine clothes I got to listen to you?"

Frédéric made a last effort.

"But—suppose Odette were dying . . ."

"Let her die! It's the best thing she could do."

He turned his back on Frédéric, stooped, and starting cutting the grass with rageful sweeps of his sickle. After a moment, without rising, he snarled over his shoulder:

"You can tell those fine gentlemen, aye, you can tell 'em straight; old Baillet ain't no weathercock, they can't talk him round."

Frédéric glanced back at the cottages; the wall of Baillet's was covered with moss-roses, in the next garden someone was watering a flower-bed. Reluctantly he walked away, crumpling up Odette's letter in his pocket. What a damned fool the man was, with his determination to make the worst of things at all costs, when a few simple words of explanation might have put everything right! The truth, of course, was that he had come to enjoy his rôle of tragic victim, and the more he drank the more intractable he would become.

It took Frédéric longer than he expected to get back to the town by the way Baillet had indicated, and he had to hurry to catch his train. For the first time in his life he had to carry, unaided, for the full length of the Quai Vallin, the two big suitcases, which slapped his calves at every step. There were taxis waiting outside the station, and some of the drivers grinned ironically when they saw him; two, however, raised their caps with a slightly sheepish air.

He swallowed hard before saying: "Third Single, Paris."

Hitherto he had always taken the night train, reserving the one and only sleeper in it, and giving a twenty-franc tip to the attendant.

A porter came up and offered to help him with his luggage.

"No, thanks. I can manage."

Actually this was the first time he was travelling Third, and as

he walked along the corridor, looking for a place, he was surprised to find the train so crowded. At last he discovered a few inches of seat unoccupied, in a carriage full of soldiers.

“Is that seat free?”

“Can’t you see it is?”

He hoisted his suitcases over their heads into the rack, which was not of netting, but consisted of three strips of wood. After sitting for a moment he went to the corridor and pressed his face to a window just as the train was passing a big notice-board on which was painted in red letters, “La Rochelle.”

When he came back to his seat, a young fellow beside him had already started peeling an orange.

PART III: PARIS

I

HE brought to mind one of those matrons with flagging breasts, common sights on every fashionable sea-beach, who, with placid shamelessness, wear bathing-costumes so absurdly large and loose that, at the least movement, they disclose portions of the anatomy better kept concealed. Like them, Paulette Grindorge had the outward aspect of a respectable married woman, and like them she flaunted her nakedness so unselfconsciously that it took one's breath away.

Philippe had nearly finished dressing and was knotting his tie in front of the dressing-table when she emerged from the bathroom without a stitch on, and made her usual exclamation :

“What! You’re dressed already? I’m afraid I always make you wait.”

She didn’t seem to realize that, after a certain moment, the great thing was to escape as soon as possible from the depressing atmosphere of this hotel bedroom, rented by the afternoon. Her instincts led her to do just the opposite. With the meticulousness of a good housewife she spread a towel on the seat of an armchair upholstered in red plush, before sitting down and beginning to pull on a grey silk stocking.

“I’m sorry to be so slow. Still, it’s so nice having a little time to talk all by ourselves, isn’t it?”

There was the hiss of rain on the street outside, the lights of the Rue Cambon glimmered across the curtains, and a steady drone of traffic came from the neighbouring boulevards. It was one of those cold, clammy evenings one has in Paris in the late autumn, when even the lights seem steeped in moisture, pavements are black with jogging umbrellas, and taxis swish in never-ending files over the slippery asphalt.

“That’s an awfully pretty tie. I can’t think how you manage it, Philippe, but you always look so much more *chic* than other men.”

Philippe did not turn, but he could see her in the glass, in a rather ungainly attitude, one leg cocked up, with a stocking half drawn on. She had hardly changed at all in the last five years ; her face had still its sallow shapelessness, her figure its crude profusion, her hair was the same lack-lustre brown. Her legs curved slightly inwards and, when she hurried, her knees kissed.

At last she made a move, and, after fastening one stocking, began hunting for the other in a heap of underlinen on a chair.

"You know, Philippe, if you're really in a hurry you needn't wait."

"That's all right."

"Have you people dining with you this evening ?"

"I don't think so. Unless Martine's invited someone."

"You're quite sure she . . . she hasn't any suspicions ?"

If only the woman had the sense to spare him this tiresome quarter of an hour ! But that was too much to hope for. In fact, he suspected that she was deliberately dawdling over her dressing, and his eyes hardened as he watched her in the mirror making comical grimaces as she twisted and turned to fasten her brassière, while holding half a dozen pins between her lips.

He lit a cigarette and, for want of anything better to do, strolled over to the window and peeped out through a chink between the curtains. Suddenly he exclaimed :

"God damn and blast it !"

It was so unexpected, and so unlike him, that Paulette jumped up and ran to his side, half naked as she was.

"What's up ? Is it . . . ?"

For months she'd felt sure this would happen one day—and now it *had* happened ! Drawn up on the far side of the street was a small green car with a white hood, Martine's car !

"Did you see your wife ?"

"No."

"Has she been there long ?"

"How can I tell ?"

She was pressing against him ; she smelt of face-powder and bath-salts.

There was no shop near by, nor, try as he might, could Philippe imagine any reason for Martine's coming to this street. Then, looking to his right, he saw the brilliantly lit window of an Alsatian restaurant; it was just possible she was buying something there. From above there was no chance of seeing if anyone was in the car.

"What ever shall we do?"

"Get dressed first," he said crossly. At such a moment it was an effort to conceal his distaste.

"Angry with me, Philippe?"

"Don't be absurd! Why should I be? It's not your fault."

"What are you going to tell her?"

"Ask me another! But for God's sake get your clothes on."

She looked grotesque with her dress half on, tugging at it, wriggling like an eel.

"I say, is there a back way out, here?"

He made a fretful gesture. His eyes were still on the little car, behind which people were hurrying by along the pavement.

"You can say you had a business appointment. After all, it's just an ordinary hotel."

She might think so, but most Parisians knew better; this hotel was notorious as catering for amorous occasions.

She was pouting her lips as she smeared them with lipstick in front of the glass. At last she put the lipstick in her bag and came back to Philippe's side.

"Are you quite sure it's her car?"

He was. The body had been specially built for Martine, and there was no other car like it in Paris. As a matter of fact, it was a present he had given her for the fourth anniversary of their wedding day.

For a moment Paulette had a glimpse of Philippe's face, and its look of concentrated fury made her gasp. Then abruptly he swung round and took some steps across the room.

"She'll stay till we come out, that's certain. I expect she's been laying for us for some time."

"Do you think she'll . . . she'll make a scene?"

"A scene. No, that's not her way. But it's a rotten business, all

the same. Especially as it will be much more difficult for us to meet each other after this."

Paulette had a pleased smile.

"Are you so keen on our meeting?"

"Don't be absurd. Of course I am."

"Listen, Philippe darling. There's no need to worry. We're sure to find some way of . . ."

"If only you were free!"

"What would you do?"

"Marry you, of course."

"But you've a wife . . . and a son."

He shrugged his shoulders, as if implying these were details. But all the time he was stealthily watching her, and he saw that his words had moved her deeply, there were tears in her eyes.

"Albert would never hear of a divorce," she said sadly.

"I know that."

That, too, wasn't what he wanted.

"Well then? I don't . . ."

"That's enough. . . . Look here! We can't stay in this room for ever. I'll leave first. You can watch what happens."

She helped him into his blue overcoat, brought him his grey felt hat from the mantelpiece, and held her face towards him for the usual kiss.

"When?" That question, too, had become a habit.

"How can I say?" he sighed, with a slight lift of his arm towards the curtained window, the street where the car persisted in remaining.

They went together to the landing, and Paulette leant over the banisters to watch him going down. Then she ran back to the window. She could only see half-way across the street. Suddenly Philippe's form entered her field of vision; he was walking straight towards the car.

And, just as he came up to it, the car moved off. For a moment Philippe seemed at a loss; then he glanced up at the hotel window, with a shrug, and stretched out his arm to hail a passing taxi.

Were Philippe's ears burning? And Martine's? They might

have been, for they were being talked about three hundred miles away, in Mme Brun's drawing-room, where now an unfamiliar scent hung in the air.

The Paris drizzle was here replaced by a downpour, and in all parts of La Rochelle one heard the boom of heavy seas.

Françoise, Mme Brun's daughter, had just arrived unexpectedly, swathed in costly furs and redolent of scent, and, though it was a year since her last visit, had already told her mother she would be leaving next day.

"Jean's expecting me in London. I'm going *via* Dieppe and shall have to make a rather early start."

Then she gave the old lady a long look.

"It's extraordinary, really. You haven't changed a bit."

After which she peered at Charlotte, who was sitting in a dark corner and hadn't said a word so far.

"What's the trouble, Charlotte? Not feeling any better?"

"No. Worse!"

"It's in . . . the same place as before?"

"Yes," Charlotte rejoined suddenly, adding in a harsh tone, "In the uterus, if you must know!"

The unfairness of it all! she was thinking. Other women can have a host of lovers and get away with it. And I, with my two poor little love-affairs, must needs be singled out . . . !

After half an hour in the company of the two women, her mother and the prematurely aged companion, Françoise felt as if she were being slowly suffocated. Taking advantage of a moment when Charlotte was out of the room, she asked Mme Brun:

"How do you two manage about the housework?"

How did they manage? Well, as Mme Brun disliked seeing new faces round her, the lodge-keeper's wife did the rough work. And just now, things being as they were, it was Mme Brun who waited on Charlotte, oftener than not! That was how they managed.

But Charlotte never showed a spark of gratitude; on the contrary, she was always whining:

"I know what you'd like best—for me to die! I'm just a burden

on you, and don't I know it! Really, if you put poison in my food one day I shouldn't be surprised."

Much against the grain, Françoise had agreed to stay with her mother overnight. Really it was the least she could do, considering her visits were so rare. Still, she felt thoroughly ill at ease in this huge, lugubrious house. And, as Philippe was doing at almost this very moment in the hotel bedroom, she walked to a window, drew aside a curtain and gazed at the next house.

"How are the Donadieus getting on?"

"Getting fewer," her mother smiled. She affected such laconic answers, which she took for witticisms. She had lost none of her archness with the years, and a band of watered silk still hid the wrinkles of her neck, her dresses had an old-world coquetry.

"Only Marthe and her husband," she explained after a moment, "are here now. The Queen-Mother, as Charlotte calls her, lived for a bit in the lodge at the entrance of the drive, but I rather think her daughter disapproved of this arrangement. Anyhow, she's moved to Paris."

"So Martine told me."

"Oh? So you've met her there?"

"We have the same dressmaker. And we sometimes meet at parties. She's developed into quite a beauty, and she's always exquisitely dressed." She leant forward to look at the house, where lights were showing only on the ground floor. "Doesn't Marthe find it rather boring?"

"Oh no. She's quite a social leader nowadays, or thinks she is. Whenever a lecturer comes to La Rochelle, she gives a reception in his honour. Last week she had a Marshal of France to dinner."

"What's Michel doing?"

"He's on the Riviera, but I can't say where. Since his wife left him he hardly ever comes to La Rochelle."

"Any news of Eva?"

"No."

From a corner of the room came a shrill, embittered voice:

"What earthly interest can they have for you, these people and their doings?"

The truth was that Charlotte resented the idea of a third party

being let into *their* secrets, the tittle-tattle with which she and her employer whiled away their days.

“What has Martine to say? Do you see her often?”

“Only now and then. Do you know, I’ve an idea things aren’t running too smoothly between her and Philippe. I don’t know anything definite, but I gathered it from friends who sometimes dine at their place.”

Charlotte, who seemed to think her disease gave her every right, cut in rudely:

“Can’t you two stop talking? Or, anyhow, change the subject?”

Philippe had begun by telling the taxi-driver to take him to the Avenue des Champs-Elysées. He had had a momentary glimpse of his wife’s face through the window of the car. Why she should have made off like that completely baffled him; though at the moment he’d fancied she was smiling mischievously, like someone who has brought off a practical joke. But perhaps this was only an illusion, due to the glass and the lights of passing cars.

The Avenue looked like a river that evening, or, rather, a canal, with taxis plying continuously in both directions, held up, as at a lock-gate, at each crossing. The driver looked round to be told where to stop.

“Drop me at Fouquet’s, please.”

He went there daily, always at about this hour. And tonight his car was waiting for him outside the café. Félix, his chauffeur, hurried towards him and deferentially asked for orders.

“Stay here. I’ll be back presently.”

A commissionnaire held a big red umbrella over his head. When about to enter, Philippe went back to his car and asked Félix:

“Did you see my wife before starting? Did she ask you anything?”

“No, sir, I didn’t see anyone.”

That made it even more perplexing. Whenever he met Paulette at the hotel in the Rue Cambon, he always arranged for his car to be waiting outside Fouquet’s; it was a sort of alibi.

It looked as if either Martine had shadowed him from the start, or else somebody in the know had told her.

Fouquet's was crowded as usual, and there was a babel of talk in many tongues. After a waiter had helped him off with his coat and taken it with his hat to the cloak-room, Philippe instinctively glanced at his reflection in a glass and ran his hand over his brown hair.

Paulette's right, he thought. It's a bit unusual wearing that lemon-yellow tie with a double-breasted suit, but somehow I can carry it off; it doesn't look too *outré*. His hands were white and expertly manicured, and his small moustache emphasized the whiteness of his teeth.

On his way to the bar he greeted two or three acquaintances with an absent-minded air, as though he hardly recognized them. This was not due to his present frame of mind; it was one of his mannerisms.

The barman greeted him with a flash of his shaker.

“Good evening, Monsieur Philippe.”

“Hullo! Here's Philippe!” There were six or seven of them round the bar, and, though they never met elsewhere, they called each other by their first names. The usual jests were exchanged.

“Well, this *is* a surprise! I thought you were in jug.”

“Why should I be?”

“Oh, I heard they'd just rounded up another broker. That's the fourth this week.”

“And how about the film-producers?” Philippe retorted. “They've just run in the fifth—not counting the two who got across the frontier in the nick of time.”

Poker-dice rattled for another round of cocktails. Philippe found he was perspiring, and dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief. His thoughts were still running on Martine and the way she had driven off without a word.

Saying to the man beside him, “Back in a moment,” he hurried down to the basement, where the telephone-operator, cloak-room and lavatory attendants all knew him.

“Get me Turbigo 3721.”

While waiting, he lit a cigarette and examined his face again in a glass, making little fretful noises like a busy man resenting every wasted moment.

"Your number, Monsieur Philippe."

"Hullo! That you, mother? Look here, I wonder if you'd come to dinner with us tonight? No, at home. There's no need to dress. I don't think there'll be anybody else. Good! I'll send Félix with the car to fetch you. So glad you can come."

He stepped out of the telephone-box, and stared for a moment at the floor, thinking quickly.

"Call my flat." He had no need to give the number.

"Who's speaking? Oh, it's you, Rose. Has your mistress come back? Yes? No, don't disturb her. Just tell her that Madame Donadieu will be dining with us. Yes. I'll be home in an hour or so."

Had he acted wisely? There was no telling. Anyhow, her mother's presence would mean a breathing-space, postpone the irksome task of "explaining."

When he returned to the bar, Grindorge was there; he, too, came nearly every evening. The two men greeted each other like old friends who do not need to converse.

"All O.K., Philippe?"

"Quite, thanks." And, leaning on the brass rail of the bar, Philippe skimmed the evening paper in silence. So absorbed was he in his thoughts that he forgot to send the car for Mme Donadieu. Only a quarter of an hour later it came to his mind; he called a page and sent him to Félix with a message.

"I'll have to be off," Grindorge announced. "I promised to meet Paulette at half-past seven. What are you and Martine doing tonight?"

"We shall stay in, I expect. My mother-in-law's coming to dinner."

"Come and meet us after the theatre."

"Well, I might. But I can't promise anything."

There was no need to name the meeting-place; the two young couples were always about together. They even went to the same places for their holidays and often took long motor trips together in the week-ends.

"You don't look too fit, old chap," Grindorge remarked.

"Nonsense. I'm quite all right."

"Business worries?"

"No. But I've a slight headache this evening, I can't think why."

"See you later, then?"

"Perhaps."

"Do come. Paulette will be so pleased."

And Philippe couldn't help murmuring under his breath, "You fool!"

But an amiable fool, almost pathetic in his devotion to his friend Philippe, who had opened to him new horizons, jolted him from the rut into which he had been settling.

People were starting dinner and, one after the other, the cocktail-drinkers left the bar, where presently Philippe found himself alone. Now and again he cast a fretful glance at the clock. Not until it said half-past eight did he toss away the paper, pay for his drinks, and beckon to the page who was waiting with his coat and hat.

"Have you your car, sir?"

"No. Call a taxi."

He gave the driver his address: 28, Avenue Henri-Martin.

It was a huge block of modern flats. A wrought-iron entrance-door, backed with a mirror, led into a spacious, pillared vestibule. Philippe entered the lift and rang at a door on the second floor. After his valet had helped him off with his coat, he drew a deep breath, like a man about to take a plunge, and walked resolutely to the drawing-room door.

"Hullo, mother! It was nice of you to come." He kissed her on the forehead as usual; then turned to his wife, who was in an armchair.

"Evening, Martine dear," he murmured in the vaguely affectionate tone that, also, had become habitual with him.

She accepted his kiss tranquilly, then went on conversing with her mother. Mme Donadieu was in the best of spirits, as always when she had an opportunity of breathing the atmosphere of luxury pervading the famous Avenue. This evening she had only one regret: that there were no guests, and they weren't dressed for dinner.

She had not greatly changed; only one weakness had grown on

her, a passion for jewellery of all descriptions. And being unable to afford the real thing, she bedecked herself with imitations.

“So you think it’s the same story?”

Philippe, who had no idea what they were talking about, helped himself to half a glass of port.

“From what she says in her letter, I gather he has just the same queer moods. If I were in her place, I’d be very careful. Remember the silly thing we did when we gave him that tutor.”

He understood that they were talking about Kiki, and comparing with him Marthe’s son, who, as Mme Donadieu had remarked, seemed to take after him, was moody, and hostile towards his parents. But Philippe was too much preoccupied with his own troubles to pay attention. The two women went on talking, and their voices were no more than a vague burden to his thoughts.

“Dinner is served, Madame.”

Philippe heaved a sigh of relief. The first phase, anyhow, was over. His mother-in-law took the seat on his left, Martine sat facing him. The small boy, Claude, always had his meals in the nursery, with the nurse.

“You like trout in Chablis, don’t you, mother?”

“Very much indeed! Trout’s always been my favourite fish, as you know. The trouble is it’s so terribly dear now, even in the Saint-Antoine market where I do my shopping, and everything’s only half the price you have to pay in this part of Paris.”

Martine’s face betrayed no emotion of any kind. Though usually she changed for dinner, she was still in the tailor-made costume she had been wearing in the afternoon. She carried out her duties as hostess with perfect calmness, giving now and again an almost imperceptible sign to the white-gloved butler, who was waiting at table.

Philippe gave her a tentative look, pursing his lips in a humorously childish pout that usually worked when they’d had a tiff and he wanted to make peace. But she merely raised her eyebrows a little, as if wondering what he meant.

The conversation turned to a play that Mme Donadieu had been to see; she had become a great theatre-goer, and Philippe supplied her frequently with tickets. Her only complaint was the host of

small expenses on the side ; the programme, the cloak-room charge, the tip expected by the woman who showed her into her seat.

"When you add in the taxi-fare, it comes to twenty francs all told, sometimes more."

The butler heard all this without surprise ; he was used to old Mme Donadieu and her talk. Philippe went on eating, hardly knowing what he was doing, and wiping his lips a shade too often with his napkin. Now and again he looked at Martine and sighed.

"Lucky chap !" his friends said. "His wife's one of the prettiest women in Paris."

That was so. Even Mme Donadieu was impressed by Martine's grace, especially when she remembered Marthe who was running to fat, and Michel with his flabby cheeks and the big pouches under his eyes. Whereas Martine's appearance had steadily improved, and now there was something dazzling about her beauty.

Added to which, she had poise, an unfailing self-possession that warned off male admirers and made other women ill at ease. So much so that some accused her of "putting on airs" ; others, of being "an iceberg."

"Serve the coffee in the drawing-room, please."

She rose first, and was followed by her mother. When presently Philippe joined them, smoking a cigarette, she paid no attention to him.

"I expect you young people want to be going out," smiled Mme Donadieu. "Don't let me keep you."

"No, mamma. We've no plans for tonight."

"Because, if you have, you mustn't mind about me. . . . You'll let me have the car to go back in, won't you, Philippe ?"

"How about a liqueur, mamma ?" Martine suggested.

Mme Donadieu nodded cheerfully ; now she was living by herself, she had developed a fondness for such small self-indulgences as sweet liqueurs, *bonbons*, and frequent visits to the picture-house, sometimes seeing two shows in an afternoon.

"Business doing well, Philippe ?"

"Excellently."

"Then you're one of the lucky ones. I hear nothing but grumbles about the depression. But the worse things get, the more

money you seem to make. Poor Frédéric was telling me only yesterday . . .”

Conscious that she had made a slip, she coughed and reached towards the sugar-basin. Philippe sprang to his feet.

“How many lumps?”

“Two, please.”

All this was on the surface; inwardly Philippe had an unwonted sense of insecurity, and he kept giving his wife imploring glances, as if to say: “Let’s make it up. Don’t harden your heart against me. I can explain everything. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Yet it was he who pressed Mme Donadieu to stay; so much he dreaded being alone with Martine.

At last the old lady rose.

“Well, my dears; I really must be off. For once in a way you haven’t any guests, and you’ll enjoy a nice quiet evening by yourselves, I’m sure.”

Martine merely smiled, and Philippe dared not insist any further.

After the front door had closed, the butler came and took away the coffee-tray. With a seeming-casual gesture Martine picked up a book.

“Please hear what I have to say,” Philippe began.

Looking up from her book, she gazed at him steadily. And he found he had forgotten all he’d meant to say! A wave of anger surged up in him, anger with himself, the world at large, his wife included.

“Do you intend to go on sulking all the evening?” he said harshly.

“So sorry. . . . I didn’t know that I was sulking.”

“No cheap irony, please. You know quite well we’ve got to have a talk, you and I.”

“Was it I who asked mamma to dine here this evening?”

“Oh, so that’s your latest idea? I mustn’t ask your mother round when I feel like it?”

She made as if she was absorbed in her book. He jumped up, snatched it from her hand, and flung it across the room.

“I insist on your listening to me.”

Docilely she gazed at him, and waited.

"I wonder if you realize how absurdly you're behaving? It's all very well to take that superior air, but . . . Look here! I suppose you know that everybody's grousing about the 'slump' nowadays, and cutting down expenses. Well, I'm making all the money I want, and there's never been a question of cutting down expenses as far as you're concerned. That's a fact, isn't it? I let you have everything you want?"

She kept quite still, and the calmness of her gaze, her aloofness, enraged him still more.

"To do that I have to work twenty hours a day. And I can assure you that some of those hours are hellish. And yet—you're jealous, vulgarly jealous, like any stupid little *bourgeoise*, and, instead of helping, you try to make things harder."

At last she spoke.

"Are you referring to our friend, Madame Grindorge?"

"I'm referring to your jealousy in general, and especially to . . ." He fumbled for his words.

"To what happened this afternoon, you mean, don't you? Please observe that you're the first to mention it. I hadn't said a word."

"Perhaps not. But your—your whole attitude this evening was just the same as . . ."

"Now listen to me, Philippe." She had risen to her feet, as though to stress the gravity of what she had to say. "It's no use shouting—or destroying the furniture." (He had picked up a Sèvrés statuette, and was making as if to dash it on the floor.) "I won't ask you how long you've been going to that hotel in the Rue Cambon with Paulette. And I won't speak about all those nights when the four of us have been together at cabarets, dances, and the rest of it."

"You'd need some nerve to do so!"

"Really?"

"Do you imagine it's for the pleasure of their company that I cultivate the Grindorges? Must I say it all over again—what I've told you dozens of times? It's thanks to their money that we could make a start, and if I'm able to carry on now, it's because I have behind me the capital that Grindorge—"

"There's no need to shout like that. The servants can hear every word."

"It's all your fault if . . ."

"No, please let me speak, Philippe." Her tone was mild, conciliatory. "I'm not going to scold you. I want to say just one thing, and after that I'll leave you in peace. Do you remember telling me one evening that you'd brought off a fine *coup*, and how pleased you were with yourself? There was nothing, you said, you couldn't do, once you set your mind on it." He must have said it in some boastful moment, and it disquieted him to see how she had stored it up in her memory. "And then you laughed and said you could at last confess how you'd forced your way into the Donadieu home. Into the Donadieu home, mind you; not my bedroom."

He dropped his eyes uneasily. What a damned fool he had been to give himself away like that, in a moment of insensate pride!

"You told me about that poor woman, Charlotte, who used to let you in by the garden door, and whom you had to make love to on the way back. And that wasn't all. Do you remember saying—?"

"Stop!"

"I'm almost done. I'll repeat, word for word, the last thing you said. It was this: 'One should stick at nothing when one sees the way to success. Charlotte served as a stepping-stone, and a very useful one she was.'"

Philippe turned his back on her, still holding the little statuette.

"And now I've only one thing more to tell you, Philippe. *I refuse to serve as a stepping-stone.* Is that quite clear? No, don't go away. Answer me, please."

He could not get a word out. There was something so uncanny in her springing this on him today of all days, that he felt a qualm of fear. With an effort he pulled himself together. No, it was pure coincidence; no more than that. Though Martine had a curious knack of reading the minds of others—his, especially, as he had often noticed—there was nothing supernormal about her insight. She could not possibly know what he'd been saying to Paulette as she nestled against him in the hotel bedroom:

"If only you were free . . .!"

Or her reply—each word of that short colloquy had stuck in his mind.

"Albert would never hear of a divorce." And, "But you've a wife . . . a son. . . ."

At which the gesture he had made came back to him so vividly—and the unspoken thought that lay behind it—that again he gave Martine a nervous glance, half afraid that she had read his mind. Abruptly turning on his heel, he walked out and shut himself up in his bedroom.

"I refuse to serve as a stepping-stone."

He could hear her giving orders to the butler and the cook, and now remembered that a member of the Government was coming to lunch with them next day.

"After the hors d'œuvre . . ." she was saying.

Walking to the window, he flung it open. The leafless branches of the trees along the Avenue were slowly dripping in the windless air. Some patches of the pavement were bone-dry, he noticed, others glistened with moisture. Footsteps rang receding into the distance, ceased, and a door closed.

II

In the big house at La Rochelle life still went on to the ordered rhythm that had been set, once for all, in Oscar Donadieu's lifetime. The sounds, the lighting, even the smell of the place, were much the same as ever.

At Paris, Philippe had created, not only a Dargens atmosphere, but a Dargens style of decoration. Thus, on opening his eyes that morning, while his man drew back the curtain on a drab, rain-dimmed sky, the first thing on which his gaze fell was the glossy Russia leather covering the walls of his room. That had been one of his innovations, having leather to replace wall-paper.

Much of the first thrill had worn off, but he still felt pleased with his originality every time he saw the walls. The curtains, too, were in leather, dyed jade-green, and so was his counterpane. The

dressing-gown which his man handed him was of a yellow hue that just missed garishness.

It was seven o'clock. Only as to early rising did the Dargens order conform with Donadieu tradition. However late he got to bed, even if he was not home till daybreak, Philippe invariably rose at seven, and from the moment his eyes opened his mind began to march again.

This morning, as he put on his slippers, gazing at the bare branches and cheerless sky, he frowned and sighed heavily; like a swarm of pestering insects, his anxieties of the previous night had come back in full force.

“The blue suit, sir?”

Again he glanced absent-mindedly outside.

“No, the dark grey.”

As he stepped into the bathroom he was wondering if it wouldn't have been better to have stayed and had things out with Martine on the previous night. In the bathroom, which was in black marble, he washed and cleaned his teeth; then, still frowning, entered the dressing-room, which was fitted up as a miniature gymnasium.

“Morning, Pedretti.”

He had no need to see the man. He knew he was standing there, waiting, in his boxing kit. It was on the tip of his tongue to say:

“I don't feel like sparring this morning. You can go.”

But he did not say it. Exercise might do him good, take his mind off his troubles. He held out his wrists to Pedretti, to have the gloves adjusted. But his thoughts were still on Martine, and he kept glancing towards the wall beyond which was her room.

“That's enough for today, Pedretti. Tomorrow, as usual.”

He dressed with his usual brisk precision, and at a quarter to eight was ready to go out. After a moment's hesitation he started towards Martine's room.

“Is your mistress up yet, Rose?”

“No, sir. She told me last night she wasn't to be waked on any account.” The girl gave almost the impression of wanting to bar his access to the room.

With a slight shrug he went to the next door, and entered the

nursery, where the Alsatian nurse was rubbing down his five-year-old son with a huge soapy sponge.

After a glance he closed the door again. There was no time to waste. As he came down the steps Félix, his chauffeur, raised his cap politely and held the door of the car open. Without asking where to go, he started down the Avenue Henri-Martin.

Here once again one recognized the "Dargens touch." Though the offices took up only one floor of the big building in the Avenue des Champs-Elysées, Philippe had his private lift and his own commissionnaire in green livery waiting on the ground floor.

The monogram *R.M.C.*, prefixed and followed by a star, was much in evidence, on the wrought-iron gate of the lift, on the commissionnaire's badge, and even woven into curtains. And though Philippe's style of dressing made him look even younger than his years, and indeed had something of the gigolo, he carried it off well and, as he walked into his spacious office, cut the figure of a man who has made good in life and is used to being obeyed.

The lay-out of his office followed that of certain American business premises he had seen on the pictures—for he turned everything to account. One entered a roomy vestibule to which the public had access, extending the full length of the floor. Separated from this by a counter and a grille, as in banks, was a row of offices, each with a brass plate bearing an employee's name and function. Behind these offices, again, was a row of doors in frosted glass inscribed—this, too, was something he had picked up from the films—"Manager," "Sub-Manager," "Accountant," and so forth.

An electrical apparatus clocked in each member of the staff—Philippe himself and Grindorge as well as the employees, who, as they took off their overcoats, greeted the head of the firm, if he was about, with :

"Good morning, Monsieur Philippe."

He had made it known that he liked being addressed thus, rather than as "Monsieur Dargens."

On entering his office he had, as usual, ten minutes in hand before the morning mail was brought. As in his bedroom, the walls were covered with leather, which here was embossed at regular intervals with the firm's monogram and the stars. On

the left of his desk was another door, which still bore the letters *P.E.M.*, the style of the now defunct concern which Philippe had launched with Grindorge soon after his elopement with Martine.

The mail was brought in and Philippe sorted it out, with a clerk standing by, for he made a point of doing this himself. There were envelopes bearing postmarks of every part of France and addressed "*Raw Materials Corporation*," or, briefly, "*R.M.C.*," containing cheques, money-orders and, in some cases, demands for payment.

Grindorge arrived a few minutes late and, after knocking, stepped into the office.

"Feeling better? You didn't look too well last night. . . . Good. See you later."

Grindorge was not even the Sub-Manager. His office bore the title "*Statistical Department*," and he spent his days immured in it with his clerk, a rather pretty girl. Though greatly smitten, he dared not make advances; Michel Donadieu's mishap had left a deep impression on him.

By half-past eight business was in full swing. A luminous panel, on which the prices of raw materials in the various world-markets were shown as the reports came in, began to glow with changing lights. Caron entered, closed the door carefully behind him, and sat down facing Philippe.

Sallow-faced, his eyes dulled by insomnia, his unkempt moustache straggling over his upper lip, he looked out of place in the luxurious office. Philippe had made this man, who had joined the office as a clerk in the Accounts Department, his second-in-command, and he was the only member of the firm who knew its true position. Philippe gave him a questioning look.

"I'll have the forty thousand by lunch-time."

"Good. That will see us through."

"Only till the next make-up day. In my opinion we'd do well to wind up the *R.M.C.* before things get too hot."

They spoke in whispers. With Caron, anyhow, Philippe had no need to bluff or keep up appearances, and in the bleak morning light the signs of strain on his face were cruelly apparent.

"Anyhow, that gives us a couple of months' respite, doesn't it?"

"May be. But what shall we do then?"

"You'll see." Hadn't he always risen to the occasion in a crisis? And weren't all his operations part of a set plan?

The gramophone venture had been wound up, but it had served its turn. By enabling Grindorge to make some easy money, it had established once for all his confidence in Philippe.

Then the subsidiary company had been floated at La Rochelle; as a result, the major part of the Donadieu business had come under Philippe's control. A year later he had bought out Michel's interest for cash, and he now held a majority of the shares in the family concern. But these ventures were provincial; there was no big money in them, though, from an investment angle, they paid reasonably well.

Only one of his flotations had failed, a co-operative known as "Home Fisheries." The capital was in hundred-franc shares, and each share entitled its holder to a specified quantity of fish delivered weekly at his door, at wholesale rates. Somewhere in the office there was a rack of dusty files relating to this company, and, though three years had elapsed since its demise, now and again some worthy provincial would call to ascertain the market-value of his share.

The *R.M.C.* was on a bigger scale altogether, and its staff included fifty canvassers whose business it was to sell to the public futures in rubber, copper, sugar, wool, and similar produce. Grindorge was on the Board of Directors and had been allotted a task after his own heart, the collation of statistics. He had ant-like industry and a methodical mind, and he spent long hours tabulating the figures given in telegrams, market reports, and financial reviews from every quarter of the globe. His services had not the least value to the company, but they kept him out of mischief and under Philippe's supervision, pending the time when he would step into his father's fortune.

A fortune somewhere between a hundred and two hundred million francs. And, for getting about Paris, old Grindorge never used anything but the Underground!

"Hullo! Ask my wife to come to the 'phone, please. . . . That you, Martine? Philippe here."

He spoke in a low voice, cupping the receiver with his hand, his eyes fixed on the glazed door of his office.

"I've been thinking about that luncheon-party we have today. We asked the Grindorges, you remember? I was wondering . . . " He fumbled for his words, gripping the receiver with unnecessary force. "Hullo? Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes. . . . What about it?" Her voice had no trace of anger. She was merely waiting to hear what he had to say.

"Well, I was wondering if . . . if under the circumstances I hadn't better put them off. Or, perhaps . . . "

"Why should we put them off?"

"I thought . . . Oh, all right, we'll let it stand. Quite sure you don't mind?"

"Why should I?"

"Good. That's settled, then. Sorry to have bothered you. See you presently."

The great thing was to keep his head and, as to that, Philippe had no apprehension. He'd been in tight corners often enough, and always held his own. To regain contact with everyday life he visited the outer offices, where, as Caron put it, "things were humming." Ten or a dozen typewriters were clicking merrily, office-boys running messages between the various departments, and behind the grille a number of customers could be seen lined up, waiting their turn. Several of the girls raised their eyes from their typewriters, to gaze ecstatically at their handsome young employer, so like a hero of the films.

Philippe dropped in on Grindorge.

"All going well?"

"Excellently. Do you know, I've just discovered that in the period 1900 to 1905 the export of Australian wools was . . . "

"Sorry, but I can't stay now. You must tell me later."

His nerves were still unsettled, and this made him furious with himself. No sooner was he back in his office than he picked up the receiver of the telephone on his right, which led directly to the exchange.

"Is that you, Paulette?"

She gave a little cry, then asked him to hold on while she shut

the door. He could picture her, half dressed, in the untidy bedroom, all in a flutter now that the call she'd been awaiting all the morning had come through.

"Well? What did she say?" she panted.

"There's no need to get flustered. It's nothing so terrible as all that. Martine took it quite sensibly."

"Does she know it was I with you . . . ?"

"No, she doesn't."

"Are you quite sure? She's very clever, you know, she may be playing a deep game. If you knew how awful I feel about it! I didn't sleep a wink last night."

"Sorry, I've a lot to do, I must ring off now. Anyhow, I shall see you at lunch presently. You've only got to behave in the ordinary way and, you'll see, everything will go quite smoothly."

"Oh, I couldn't face it! I shan't come."

"You've got to. I insist. *Au revoir*, dear."

"But—"

He hung up, then stared at the receiver, as if wondering to whom else he could telephone.

"I refuse to serve as a stepping-stone." The words kept ringing in his ears. It was the worst blow to his pride that he had ever experienced. Even when "Home Fisheries" had gone into liquidation and the Receiver had put him through it, he had felt less embarrassed, less humiliated.

And it was Martine who had dealt the blow; Martine, whom he had shaped little by little to his liking, who was in a sense his creation. Never during the five years of their married life had he thought of her as a young woman with a personality and a will of her own, who might on occasion stand up to him with a decided "No!"

Her "No" was not even a Donadieu "No," that could be circumvented. The other members of the family had all ended up by giving in; Michel, to start with. He no longer dared to go back to La Rochelle, now that old Baillet in his drinking bouts—which occurred every Saturday—had taken to declaring to all and sundry that he'd get even with the bastard who had ruined his daughter; if ever he set eyes on him, he'd shoot at sight!

It had been an easy task for Philippe to persuade his brother-in-law that, with his weak heart, absolute rest was necessary. With the result that Michel had sold his interest in the family concern and now led an idle life on the Riviera.

All Marthe and her husband had wanted was to retain the big house in the Rue Réaumur, their place in the business hierarchy of La Rochelle, and to sit daily in the gloomy sanctum of old Oscar Donadieu, dispensing high command. To all this they were welcome as far as he, Philippe, was concerned; they could run the Fisheries and Shipping businesses as they thought fit.

As for Mme Donadieu, it was really Marthe who slowly but surely had edged her out; whereas Philippe had given the old lady a warm welcome, encouraged her to come to his flat, and now sent her theatre tickets.

Kiki and the odd young tutor had, both of them, completely vanished. Police enquiries all over France had led to nothing.

And now it was Martine who, with no show of anger—an angry outburst might have been easier to cope with than that air of quiet resolution—had stood her ground, as who should say: “Thus far—and no farther!”

A telephone shrilled. A business call. Philippe referred the man to Caron; he knew he wasn’t up to useful work that morning. A November gloom brooded on the Avenue des Champs-Elysées. Philippe’s dark blue, discreetly sumptuous saloon car, with only the tiniest of monograms glinting on the doors, was drawn up beside the kerb.

“If only you were free . . . !”

Philippe had never tolerated anyone’s putting a spoke in his wheel; even as a child he had always flared up when his plans were crossed.

Suddenly he picked up his hat and coat, looked in again at Grindorge’s office.

“I’m going out. See you at my place in an hour’s time.”

Without waiting for a reply he crossed the vestibule with the air of a man used to stare from envious or merely curious eyes, and hurried down to his car.

“To the Marbœuf Club.”

The Club was quite near his office, and he sometimes went there in the morning for a dip in the swimming-pool; but this time his visit had another object.

The lobby was empty, so was the big staircase. Without troubling to knock he entered the Secretary’s office, seated himself on the arm of an armchair and said with a slight sigh:

“Good morning.”

“Morning,” Frédéric replied, and looked up over his spectacles from the pile of vouchers he was sorting out. “What’s the trouble?”

“Do I look as if I was in trouble?”

“Yes. Tell me about it.”

“Oh, it’s nothing, really.” Philippe had been strongly against his father’s taking up this post. But though he had offered him a position on the Board of Directors of the *R.M.C.*, Frédéric had refused.

Frédéric’s hair was white; some of the briskness had left his movements and his gaze was more serene, but he carried off his age remarkably well.

“How’s Odette?” Philippe asked.

“Quite well.”

Knowing that Philippe would presently come out with the reason for this visit, Frédéric bent once more over his work. There was a long silence. Philippe lit a cigarette and held his case towards his father.

“Have you forgotten I don’t smoke?”

He had had some trouble with his heart; though nothing very serious, it had been a warning.

“I’d like you to have a talk with Martine.”

“Oh: Have you had a tiff?”

“Well, something rather tiresome happened yesterday.” Philippe’s tone betrayed his embarrassment. “She saw me leaving an hotel in the Rue Cambon—you can guess what sort of hotel. She knows that I was with Paulette.”

“Yes: How does she take it?”

“That’s just what baffles me. She didn’t make any sort of scene.

In fact, if I hadn't brought the subject up, she mightn't have said anything. I do wish you'd have a talk with her."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Anything you like. You might explain that I'm not in the least keen on Paulette really, but if it wasn't for the Grindorges' money we'd be still in that gloomy house at La Rochelle. And one of these days the old man will peg out, and the Grindorges will step into a big fortune, well over a hundred million francs."

Frédéric, who had taken off his spectacles, gazed at his son's face as calmly as Martine had gazed, and his voice was as calm as hers when he asked :

"Yes? And what then?" As Philippe looked uncomfortable, and made no reply, Frédéric added dryly: "Do you suppose Grindorge will give you a free hand with his money just because you're sleeping with his wife?"

"Don't be absurd!"

"Well, then, I simply don't follow . . ."

"Neither do I," retorted Philippe. "But that's no matter. My instinct's served me pretty well so far, you can't deny that. I don't have to think out every detail. Anyhow, Paulette can twist her husband round her little finger. And I need him, in fact I need him more than . . . than anyone else."

"Are you referring to Martine?"

"I'm referring to anyone who is fool enough to stand in my way. Of course, if you prefer to take her side against your son's . . ." He was blundering, and knew it; and he was furious with himself for letting his tongue run away with him, voicing thoughts he'd best have kept to himself. "Anyhow," he added bitterly, "I know you've always sided with the Donadieus against me."

"If that's true"—there was a hint of sadness behind the tone of irony—"I haven't brought them much luck."

"What do you mean by that remark?"

"Never mind. . . . Now, Philippe, you'd better be off. I've a lot of work to attend to."

"You won't go to see Martine?"

"I'll ring her up one of these days."

"Au revoir."

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"Never mind. . . . Now, Philippe, you'd better be off. I've a lot of work to attend to."

"You won't go to see Martine?"

"I'll ring her up one of these days."

"Au revoir."

"That's right. *Au revoir.*"

It looked better to enter in haste, like a man who has been detained up to the last moment by urgent business. His overcoat still dangling on his arm, he plunged into the drawing-room and held out his hand to the Minister, a man in his forties, of very ordinary appearance.

"So sorry to be late."

Then, in passing, he dabbed his wife's forehead with his lips, and a moment later was bending over Paulette's hand.

"Really I'm inexcusable. I didn't see you at first."

He gave Grindorge a friendly wave, saying :

"Hullo, Albert!"

A short silence followed, during which his guests tried to remember what they'd been talking about when he came in.

"Suppose we start lunch," Martine remarked.

Naturally Paulette had to be on Philippe's right, and the first thing she did was to drop her fork. Her hands were trembling and she hardly dared to look at Martine; yet, try as she might to prevent it, her eyes kept turning to the face of the young woman sitting on her right.

Philippe, who was watching her, put in a remark.

"How do you like your new flat?" The carelessness of his tone was slightly forced.

The new flat, like the Grindorges' car, the shoot they had rented near Orléans, and their house at Trouville, was of Philippe's choosing. For the habit of taking Philippe's advice on all such matters had persisted since those early days when they were as unsophisticated as the callowest provincial, and he had opened new horizons to them. Before meeting Philippe, Albert, like his father, had always used the Underground for getting about Paris, and his clothes, if not actually ready-made, always looked it. Paulette got her dresses from obscure dressmakers who professed to copy the models of the big Parisian houses. For their holidays they usually went to some family resort such as Royan, and took one floor of a villa.

Philippe had changed all that. He had introduced them to cabarets where one sups luxuriously in the small hours, to the

glamour of First Nights and Private Views ; and now Albert had the same tailor as himself, a man who came over from London once a month and tried on at the Ritz.

Facing him was Martine, who, strangely enough, looked perfectly composed. The guest of honour being the Minister of Education, she was conversing with him on scholastic topics, the shortage of playing-fields, compulsory Latin, the drawbacks of the examination system, and so forth.

Philippe kept on trying to catch her eye, but, on the rare occasions when he managed it, realized how aloof from him she was ; not less so than on the previous night, though without any trace of hostility.

She spoke to Paulette once or twice, amiably enough, but in the faintly condescending tone she always used when talking to her.

“By the way, what age exactly is your son now ?”

“Just turned six.” Paulette’s voice trembled, and she gave Martine a grateful look, as if she’d done her a favour in addressing her.

Albert was as boring as usual. Statistics had opened up to him a new world in which, for him, but for him only, everything was delightful, not to say thrilling. For there was a thrill in juggling with huge figures and making discoveries that could be most surprising—as to the amount of sugar consumed per head in the different countries, for instance ; or in defining the zones of commercial influence covered by the various nations.

Nowadays his conversations almost always began with :

“Do you know how many . . . ?”

How many tons, or yards, of cotton cloth were consumed in a given country, China for example ; how many working-hours are required to produce . . .

But today everything, State education included, was no more than a background against which showed, as if a spotlight were directed on it, Martine’s calm, grave face, her lips that moved to utter tactful commonplaces, her gaze so coldly unresponsive to Philippe’s pleading looks.

Of these the others were quite unaware ; only his wife knew what they meant, the way his eyes sought hers incessantly, the

nervous twitching of his fingers, the slight pout of his lips when she looked towards him.

It was as if Philippe were saying to her across the table, in so many words :

"Let's make peace, dear. Surely it's obvious that you have nothing to fear from a brainless little dowdy like Paulette, who's scared to death of you! And that Albert's no better than a tiresome oaf! And that precious Minister you're playing up to is nothing but a windbag, blathering away like a mob-orator, or yowling like a school-marm at the next moment! In this room there's only you and I who matter—the rest simply don't count."

He had always felt that Martine and he were of the same kind, a race apart, and their brief scene of the previous night had been a revelation. He had aimed at moulding her in his own image, and now, for the first time, he realized she was no pale replica, but his equal. He could no longer go his own gait; he had his wife to reckon with.

Meanwhile that fool Paulette could find nothing better to do than press her knee against his, under the table. It was perhaps to reassure herself, or else to convey to him that she was his, body and soul. . . . The others were still making conversation.

"So you think that the afternoons should be devoted to games at every school?"

"I wonder. You know Professor Carel's view: that games retard a boy's mental development."

Paulette's knee was getting more insistent; she had drunk two glasses of wine, and that always made her sentimental. Really, Philippe thought, it was almost pathetic that, though she must have seen herself thousands of times in her glass, she could seriously believe he was in love with her, and ready to discard for her sake the woman who sat facing him, with her grace, her clean-cut beauty, her superb poise. . . .

Paulette kept on trying to get him to talk.

"I'm sure you have your own ideas on the subject. Do let's hear."

"I've never given it a moment's thought."

"Personally," began Albert, after carefully wiping his mouth with his napkin, a sure sign that he proposed to speak at length.

His opinion, naturally, was based on figures, such as the percentage of mental defectives and suicides in American universities, the decline of T.B. in elementary schools since . . .

Once again a rush of emotion, genuine emotion, came over Philippe, and he tried with all his might to flash an unspoken message to Martine across the table. "Surely you realize now that we two are people apart and should stick together, whatever happens. Instead of being vexed, you should sympathize with me for having to waste two afternoons a week with that absurd—"

Just then Paulette upset the salt, and Philippe, who was superstitious, turned on her quite rudely :

"Why can't you take more care?"

She started, looked like bursting into tears. He pulled himself together.

"Sorry! My nerves are rather bad today. And I do hate quarrels. When one upsets the salt it means . . ."

"I know. But it was I who upset it. So it's Albert and I who will quarrel."

What made it all the more exasperating was that this boring luncheon-party was merely the means to a wholly banal end. The Minister had been invited solely because, some time in the near future, he might be expected to introduce Philippe to one of his colleagues, the Minister of Finance, from whom Philippe hoped to glean some advance information as to impending changes in the import duty on certain raw materials.

Did the Minister of Education suspect this? Philippe wondered. If not, it did little credit to his intelligence. Or, perhaps, he was an indefatigable luncher-out and accepted every invitation on principle. If he'd guessed the object of this one, it was all the funnier; for no one breathed a word on the subject throughout the meal.

Martine rose and walked into the drawing-room. Paulette, like a schoolgirl in the throes of her first love-affair, lingered for a moment to squeeze Philippe's arm and whisper passionately :

"I love you!"

He muttered something, then turned and looked down at her face.

Its expression startled him. She had always been delicate, and latterly her health had worsened. Her cheeks had a strange, translucent pallor, and grew mottled with red blotches under the stress of any emotion. But it was the look in her eyes that now amazed him : a look of mystical exaltation that he had never seen in them before. And then, gazing at him strangely, she said in a low, clear voice :

“You’ll see!”

There was no time to ask what she meant. They were entering the drawing-room and a moment later had joined the group round a low gate-legged table.

Coffee-cup in hand, Grindorge went on expounding his views to the Minister, while Martine, carrying another cup, came up to Paulette.

“Some coffee, dear ?”

Philippe felt almost sorry for Albert, and vaguely annoyed with Martine. And, for the first time in his life, he had a faint, very faint, qualm of fear—for himself. Until now he had always felt assured of having the master-hand in any situation, however dangerous. Indeed, the more critical things became, the surer he was of rising to the occasion, dominating their course, keeping his head whatever happened.

Now, as his gaze shifted from Paulette’s eyes to Martine’s, he was conscious of an unknown factor coming into play, of new developments impending—in which he might not have the upper hand. What form these would take, who would be the gainer, who the loser, he had no idea.

“I refuse to serve as a stepping-stone.” That crude term “stepping-stone”—what a fool he’d been to use it!—kept running in his head.

And now that damned fool Paulette must needs blurt out—with the maudlin earnestness that women of her stamp put into the promises they make their lovers—her cryptic: “You’ll see!” See what? When? Did she even know what she meant?

He heard the great man asking :

"Would you permit me to use your 'phone? I must call up my secretary."

While the butler guided him to a small adjoining room where he could telephone unheard, Grindorge took the opportunity of declaring:

"A charming fellow, isn't he? And very sound in his views."

Martine sank into a chair and relaxed for a moment, drawing her hand slowly across her forehead. Philippe was moving restlessly about the room. Paulette broke the silence.

"I say, we've got to have a house-warming—for the new flat, you know. What evening will suit you?"

"Oh, any evening you like," said Martine politely.

"Tonight then?"

But Albert demurred.

"No, that wouldn't give us time to make preparations."

"How about tomorrow?"

"We're going to a First Night at the *Gymnase*," Philippe said.

"Then let's make it Sunday." Seeing that Martine did not cold-shoulder her, she was getting bolder.

When the Minister returned she went up to him with a smile.

"Do come too! It would give us so much pleasure."

"Come to what?"

"To . . ."

Philippe had had enough of it. Muttering an excuse, he left the room.

III

"BUT I told you to go. I quite understand."

He hurried after her, with a show of contrition.

"It's a damned nuisance—I don't want to go a bit—but you know how important it is for me."

"Yes, Philippe, I know. And it's high time for you to start."

". . . and I promised Albert to pick him up on the way."

"Yes, so you told me."

"What do you propose to do today?"

"I haven't any plans."

"Not fed up?"

"Not a bit. But look here, if you waste any more time, there won't be any point in going."

Like a schoolboy given a holiday, he ran off to his room to dress. In less than a quarter of an hour he had managed to get into ornate shooting kit that made him look more than ever like a film-actor.

Mustn't seem too pleased, he thought. For three days he hadn't once laughed in Martine's presence, to make her understand he fully realized the gravity of what had happened. They had studiously refrained from speaking of it; the farthest Philippe went was to risk a vague allusion, such as :

"Then everything's quite all right now?"

"Quite all right."

"You won't think about it again?"

"About what?"

At all costs he wanted to avoid a real explanation, in which he might cut a poor figure, and to that end he arranged things so that his wife and he were rarely alone together.

"I must give the youngster a kiss before I start."

He was drawing on his thick yellow gloves. It was still raining heavily and, glancing at the window, he made a slight grimace, still playing the part of a man who resents the necessity of going out.

"Let's hope I can fix that business up with Weil. It's exceedingly important."

His valet followed him with his gun. At last the car started off along the slippery road.

It was a cold morning and the windows of all the flats were shut. When making plans for a house-warming, there was one thing Paulette had overlooked: that the shooting-season was in full swing.

When the car stopped at the block of flats where the Grindorges were living, Philippe told his chauffeur to blow the horn three times. Albert was ready, and had only to put on his hat and kiss his wife.

"If you feel bored, you'd better go and have a chat with Martine, or ask her round."

"Perhaps I will. . . . Off you go!"

The windows of the car were misted; both men were smoking. On either hand the vast bare cornfields of La Beauce stretched out to the grey horizon. It was a longish journey to the château on the Loire whose owner was Weil the millionaire, known as "Flour" Weil to distinguish him from Weil the film magnate, said to be heading for the Bankruptcy Court.

Martine lacked the energy to dress and go to Mass. Until noon she busied herself with small domestic duties—checking the linen, pointing out to her maid a tear in one of her dresses and explaining how to mend it, watching her small son have his bath, giving orders to the cook—but all so listlessly that afterwards she could not have said how she had employed her time.

The valet asked Rose, her maid:

"Know if she's going out this afternoon?"

"I don't think so."

The man sighed. For all her seeming apathy Martine was quite capable of devoting the afternoon to a general inspection of cupboards and wardrobes, and a check of the accounts of the various members of her staff.

"I shan't want any luncheon," she announced. "A cup of milk will do."

In other parts of Paris there would have been people about, but whenever Martine glanced from her window her eyes fell on an empty street. For once, even the old General stayed indoors. Martine did not know him, but she saw him every morning, leaving the block of flats at half-past nine, punctual as clockwork, and getting on to the horse which his orderly brought to the door. She picked up a novel but couldn't settle down to it; then allowed Claude to come to the drawing-room to play, but soon he got on her nerves, and she rang for the nurse.

What she felt, above all, was an enormous inanition, as if she were floating in a vacuum, without foothold anywhere.

At a loose end, she fell to wandering from room to room. The truth was, as she realized in a moment of bleak lucidity, that she

had identified herself too completely with Philippe. Yet, after all, that was natural enough; she had only come alive when he had taken her in hand; before, she'd been a mere nonentity.

And, strangely enough, something of the sort was true of Philippe too. In those early days his personality had, like hers, been in the rough; life together had gradually shaped them both. Never had she thought of keeping back any fragment of herself, or of excluding him from any of her interests or activities. And now, out of the blue . . . !

Philippe had noticed nothing, but she had had exactly the sensation that comes in certain dreams, when suddenly one loses foot-hold and starts slipping down into a fathomless abyss.

“Go for your shoot,” she had said to him that morning.

Before that, he had kept hovering round her with a hang-dog air, waiting for the permission that he dared not ask; and it had been a shock discovering—what she had never suspected—that there was a streak of cowardice in his nature. And she also knew that, were she to insist on his staying, he'd try every possible expedient for shirking a *tête-à-tête* with her.

Perhaps it was better so. Still, she'd have liked . . . No, what was the use of brooding? Philippe was—what he was.

Her servants found their apprehensions justified when, ruthlessly forgetful that it was a Sunday afternoon and they were dying to go to the pictures, she opened the first cupboard that caught her eye, and summoned her maid. Next, it was the cook's turn; after hers, the butler's.

“Is that you, Frédéric? Are you busy? No? Then can I come round for an hour or two?”

Mme Donadieu was at a loose end; the view from her windows, over the Place des Vosges, its railings looking even blacker than usual in the steady drizzle, and the fountain that went on playing—as if there wasn't enough water coming down already!—was no less dismal than the aspect of the Avenue Henri-Martin.

Luncheon ended, she spent a good hour dressing, and when half-way across the Square went back again to pour some milk into her cat's saucer.

A visit to Frédéric, she had found, was the best solution on Sunday afternoons like this. The only trouble was that he lived so far away, right out at the Porte Champerret, in one of the new buildings honeycombed with flatlets that had sprung up on the western edge of Paris.

She decided against the Underground—on a day like this it would be really too depressing—and boarded a 'bus. That way, there was at least the interest of the streets and shops, lights and traffic.

Facing Frédéric's door was a confectioner's, and she knew which kind of cake to buy. Then she had to take the lift, which always made her nervous, as on one occasion it had stopped between two floors when she was alone.

"Good afternoon, Frédéric. How are you, Odette?"

At first she had found Odette's presence here slightly embarrassing. But the girl had shown so much tact, and her manners were so gentle, that this embarrassment had rapidly worn off.

Their brief encounter at La Rochelle had stirred Frédéric's compassion; also he had realized at once that Odette had a really nice disposition. He had met her again in Paris, when looking up his friend Jane at the hat-shop where Odette was now employed. She had been only a fortnight in Paris, but the change that had already come over her was remarkable; she had acquired something of Parisian *chic*, or, rather—for it was her carriage and demeanour that impressed him most—developed an unlooked-for gracefulness.

"I hope you'll come to dinner with me one of these days." He had to be vague about the date; for the moment he was so short of money that it was all he could do to pay for his own meals.

That was how it had come about, much as such things happen to very young people, and actually Frédéric was in the position of a young man scouring Paris for a job. He had to take great care of his shirts and shoes, and, often as not, his dinner consisted of a *café au lait* and a few rolls.

Then a day came—really at his age it was preposterous! He felt tears coming to his eyes, and had to blow his nose with vigour—a day came when this amazing young woman, to all appearances so commonplace and unperceptive, began to guess how things

stood with him, asked him now and then to dinner, and one evening broached the subject, shyly at first, then in more pressing terms :

“Please, Frédéric, don’t refuse. It would make me so happy. And in a few months’ time, when you’re in a position . . .”

So he was being offered money, like a gigolo ! But he was deeply moved—and that evening was the beginning of it all.

When, a week later, he obtained the post of Secretary at the Marbœuf Club, they formed a habit of going out together in the evenings, but there was never any talk of love.

People on their own in Paris, like these two, very soon tire of living in an hotel or furnished rooms. After a few weeks Odette started hunting round for a little place of her own. When he had time to spare, Frédéric accompanied her in her quest.

He was with her when she inspected the flat at the Porte Chамperret (four thousand francs a year, and the usual extra charge for heating).

“It’s far too big for a girl by herself,” Odette decided regretfully. “But I should hate to let it go. The outlook is so nice, and everything’s so clean and new.”

So they resolved to share it. They settled in, and a month went by without anything taking place between Frédéric and Odette. But it was bound to end that way, and one night, quite naturally, indeed almost casually, she became his mistress.

When Mme Donadieu came to live in Paris, Frédéric sometimes went to her place for an hour’s talk ; as he used to do in La Rochelle.

“I’d love to visit you, too, sometimes, only I’m so afraid . . .”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. Come and see us ; you’ll find it’ll go quite smoothly.”

It went so smoothly that whenever Mme Donadieu was at a loose end on a Sunday she would drop in on Frédéric and Odette, bringing the inevitable coffee-cake. If anything disconcerted her, it was the flat itself. Her own was on the second floor of a very old building ; it had thick walls, huge windows, and in it Mme Donadieu could enjoy a more or less familiar setting.

But here everything was cramped, it was like being in a band-box.

Frédéric, who was tall, could touch the ceiling with his hand. The furniture was to scale, of the doll's-house type; too thickly varnished, too new and glossy, it might have come from the toy department of one of the big stores.

"But it's so easy to keep clean," Odette pointed out.

And proudly she opened what looked like a cupboard, and disclosed a chute down which refuse of all kinds was precipitated to a bin on the street-level.

"Clever idea, isn't it?"

Though that Sunday it was raining just as hard at the Porte Champerret as elsewhere in Paris, and the spectacle of streaming buses and trams had been far from inspiriting, Mme Donadieu was in a cheerful mood. Indeed, as she often told her friends, she was never bored. Least of all when she had someone to talk to.

"Do you remember, Frédéric?"

The older she grew, the farther she harked back for reminiscences, and she was now full of the period when she wore girlishly short shirts and a pigtail down her back.

Odette was brewing coffee, as they all preferred this to tea. There was a cobwebbed bottle of Armagnac on the table, and Frédéric made no secret of the fact that it came from the Marboeuf Club.

"I can't help wondering what they can find to do there all day, the two of them."

She was referring to Marthe and her husband, still interned (as she regarded it) in the old house at La Rochelle.

"You can't imagine what I endured every winter. The place was a regular ice-box. Of course, poor Oscar had heating put in, but that was years ago, and central-heating plants in those days weren't what they are now." She seldom mentioned her dead husband, but this evening something prompted her to add: "It's queer, but I can't help feeling he'd an idea that the time had come for him to go. . . ."

Looking at Frédéric, she saw that he took her meaning, and seemed to agree.

"Yes," she went on, "and it's not the first time I've had that notion. I often wonder if he hadn't lost heart. No, that's not it;

I can't find the right word, I'm afraid. But just think of what has happened since he died! You know, Frédéric, how proud he used to be of the House of Donadieu, and everything connected with it. And now—there's no one except a son-in-law. And it's another son-in-law who saved the situation when things were going wrong.

"I was always telling him he was getting more and more disagreeable every year, becoming a regular old bear! One day I really lost my temper and called him a selfish beast because he wouldn't allow any liberty to anyone, and expected us all to toe the line. And now I wonder . . ."

She paused; her thoughts were still unclear, and she knitted her brows.

"Yes, I wonder if it wasn't that, that was always on his mind: there being no one to succeed him. No one of his own kind, I mean. For instance, I'm sure he loathed Kiki. Poor Kiki! What would his father say now if he knew . . .?"

Half closing her eyes, Mme Donadieu sank back in her chair. She didn't care to have such thoughts, but there were moments, especially when she was with Frédéric, when they forced themselves upon her.

Wasn't the whole family to blame, in some ways, for what had happened to poor Kiki? He was born too late, when his parents no longer had the patience needed for handling a small, rather difficult boy. As for his brothers and sisters, they had their own interests, and left him to himself. No, Kiki had never had a fair chance. The greatest blunder, however, was to have given him that tutor, Edmond, about whose character no serious enquiry had been made, though even for a domestic servant one insists on having references.

Marthe had been the first to sound a note of warning, pointing out that the two youngsters were leading a life apart from the family, wrapped up in each other. They had no friends of their own age, read none of the books boys usually read, and, as for their physical culture, they carried it to such an excess that it ceased to be a healthy interest and seemed more like an obsession. Marthe had wound up by declaring:

"The best thing would be to send Kiki to a good boarding-school. That would knock the nonsense out of him."

They had taken her advice and sent him to a Jesuit college at Brussels.

Two months later they learned that Kiki had run away, and Edmond had disappeared with him.

"What's your idea, Frédéric? Do you think he's come back to France?"

"Most unlikely, I should say."

"Poor boy! In two months' time he'll be twenty-one. Philippe reminded me of it the other day, because of the new arrangements we shall have to make—for the estate, I mean. . . . But don't let's think about it any more. Turn on the wireless, Frédéric. Try to get something cheerful."

He was still twiddling the knobs when the telephone rang. Because of the music they nearly missed hearing it. It was five o'clock; street-lamps had just been lit, rain was still falling from a sombre sky.

"Yes?" It was Mme Donadieu who, quite at home here, answered the 'phone, and the voice at the other end showed surprise.

"Is that Monsieur Dargens's flat? Who's speaking? Oh, it's you, mamma. I didn't recognize your voice. Is that music coming from your end?"

"It's Martine," Mme Donadieu informed the others.

"Is Frédéric in?" Martine went on. "Ask him if he'd mind my coming round for a bit."

When Mme Donadieu had hung up, they looked at each other with some surprise. Martine saw Frédéric fairly often, but almost always at her flat or at meals, in a restaurant. They had a feeling that something lay behind this telephone-call, something less trivial than a mere wish for company.

"I suppose Philippe's gone shooting"—Mme Donadieu preferred to brush aside disagreeable thoughts—"and she doesn't know what to do with herself."

Of them all, it was she who had the happiest temperament, was the least susceptible to a depressing atmosphere such as that of this wet Sunday afternoon.

"Perhaps I'd better wait till she comes," Odette said, "before cutting the cake."

And instinctively she began to move about the room, making sure everything was in order—as though Martine were a guest different from others.

"Is that lamp all right here?" She had placed the small alabaster lamp on a low table near the sofa. Raindrops were flashing down the window-panes, which glimmered blue against the falling night.

"What's your idea about Philippe's business?" Mme Donadieu asked Frédéric. "Is it really doing as well as he makes out? When I think of all the money they must spend, living as they do . . ."

"There she is!" Odette had seen the small green car drawing up at the street door.

Frédéric went to the lift to meet her, and was rather surprised to see her in a plain black dress with a raincoat over it.

In this attire she looked so much like a young schoolgirl—more, a schoolgirl in mourning—that her mother was quite startled, and asked impulsively :

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. What gives you that idea?"

She stood outside the little pool of radiance from the alabaster lamp and they could not see her face. But, by some trick of the light, though she seemed only a darker shadow against shadows, her outline was as sharply defined as if seen in a stereoscope.

"Let me help you off with your coat, Madame Dargens." Martine was one of her customers at "Jane's," and Odette had always a hint of obsequiousness when addressing her.

Something in the air of the dimly lit room, a curious oppression, made Martine feel as if she were suffocating. To dispel the feeling she said briskly :

"Well, mamma?"

"Yes, my dear? What is it?"

Martine could bear it no longer.

"Why are you all staring at me like that? I suppose it's that funny little lamp that makes you look so queer. Turn on the big light, please."

But when Frédéric did so, she blinked and put her hand over her eyes.

"No, it's too strong. It was nicer before."

"What have you been doing all day?" her mother asked.

"Oh, Philippe's away at a shoot. So I've been putting in a spell of domestic drudgery. An hour ago I found I'd had enough, and I thought I'd drop in for a chat with Frédéric and Odette."

None of them was deceived by her pretence of gaiety. And it was no better when, pointing to the cake, she cried:

"Oh, how nice! That's a coffee-cake, isn't it? The one cake I like. Did you guess I was coming? . . . Why did you stop the wireless?"

"For your telephone-call. We didn't think of switching it on again."

"What were you talking about when I came in?"

"I really don't remember. What were we talking about, Frédéric? About you and Philippe very likely. Do you know, I dare say Marthe's by herself, too, at dull old La Rochelle. Her husband's sure to be at Esnandes today. Your father was the only one who never cared for shooting. . . . Where ever did you get that frock?"

She seemed quite annoyed with her daughter for being so plainly dressed.

"I unearthed it when I was turning out a cupboard. It must be over four years old. Yes, I remember now; I got this dress soon after Claude was born. Anything wrong with it?"

"Well, it's not your style. A bit depressing to my mind."

"Then it suits the weather," Martine laughed.

She kept moving about, poured out the coffee, asked for milk, and even started to the kitchen to get some.

"No, really you mustn't!" Odette protested. She seemed quite shocked at the thought of Martine's helping in her household duties.

"And how's life been using you, Frédéric?" Martine asked, for the sake of saying something.

"Oh, once a man's turned the corner, as I have . . ."

"What corner?"

"You'll understand some day. Many, many years ahead."

"Don't pretend to be so venerable. Anyhow, you don't look a day more than forty-five."

Somehow, though all were doing their best to keep the conversation alive, everything they said fell flat. There was a silence, broken only by the tinkle of knives and forks. Then Martine spoke again.

"Isn't it rather tiresome, having these trams and 'buses passing all day?"

"We're hardly ever here in the daytime," Odette pointed out with a smile. "And they slack off in the evening, thank goodness!"

Martine gazed at her almost enviously. For the best part of the day she and Frédéric were at their jobs, with no time to think about themselves or their personal troubles. And, when they came home, they had only an hour or two to go before sleep brought oblivion.

"By the way," said Mme Donadieu, "if he brings back some partridges, do remember to send me one. Not a big one, though; I like them young and tender. My teeth, you know . . ."

She was going to laugh. But just then Martine sprang up from her chair, so abruptly that she almost upset it, and walked quickly to the window, where she stood quite still, pressing her face to the pane.

"What's the matter, darling?" her mother asked in alarm.

The others, too, had risen from their seats in clumsy haste.

"Martine, what's wrong?" They could hear her gasping, trying to recover her breath. "Are you feeling ill? Shall I get you something?"

Martine shook her head, and made a little movement of impatience. Why couldn't they leave her alone? That was all she wanted. But, of course, they must needs crowd round her!

"Odette, bring some vinegar," cried Mme Donadieu.

At last Martine managed to get her breath back.

"No! Leave me in peace!" Her voice was shrill with exasperation.

"Martine! Do try to steady yourself!"

The attack of nerves was passing; Martine's body went limp, her shoulders sagged, and she gazed dully at the others, sighing:

"Please let me be for just a minute."

What had come over her? Only a sudden, frantic impulse to burst into tears, to fling herself down on a bed as Kiki used to do, gritting her teeth on the sheets and scoring them with her nails; to cry and whimper; by some means or another to give vent to her pent-up feelings.

With a weak attempt at a smile she came back to the table.

"I'm awfully sorry. It's over now."

"Have some water. I'm afraid your nerves are going wrong again. But it's only a passing phase, I expect."

Martine guessed what was in her mother's mind, and knew she was mistaken. Frédéric, however, she felt sure, had never for a moment thought she was going to have another child. His face was averted, but she could see that he was worried, frowning to himself. And when she saw a hard look settle in his eyes, she knew he was thinking of Philippe.

"I feel so ashamed of myself," she said. "I've spoilt your evening." And now her one desire was to go away.

All over Paris, caged indoors, people were grumbling, fidgeting, getting on one another's nerves.

At the Grindorges' flat, too, that morning a woman, irritated by her husband's show of reluctance when, she knew quite well, he was itching to be off, had kept repeating:

"Yes, yes. Go to your shoot. Don't bother about me."

"If I hadn't promised Philippe . . ."

"There's no need to make excuses. Of course you must go."

And—to complete the resemblance—Paulette, too, had resolved to devote this wet Sunday to household tasks. In her case, of course, there was more reason. The Grindorges had only just moved in, nothing had been allotted its final place, and there was plenty to be done.

She began by despatching her children with the governess to her father-in-law's house, and telling the cook to go to the pictures.

She wished to be alone, yet, now she had the flat to herself, seemed unable to settle down, and drifted from room to room, sinking wearily now and then on to a chair or a bed.

At these moments she fell to picturing the scene at "Flour" Weil's shoot; Philippe and Albert trudging across muddy fields, with the bark of dogs and cries of beaters echoing round them. Meanwhile at the château their hostess was feverishly supervising preparations for a midday dinner to which thirty or forty would sit down. Fifteen or twenty cars were parked in the courtyard, and presently one of the keepers would be sorting out the collective bag.

Paulette hadn't set eyes on Philippe for three days—but for a glimpse from her third-floor window, when he stepped out of the car, to let Albert stow his guns behind.

And he had telephoned only once.

"That you, Paulette? Look here, we'll have to go slow for a bit. Martine's on the warpath; she even came to the office this morning. I keep running into her at every turn. It wouldn't be safe . . ."

"But, Philippe . . ." She gave a little sob.

"I'm afraid it can't be helped, dear. I don't see much hope for the present. . . . Unless one day I've had enough of it and . . ."

"Don't say any more! You frighten me! Listen, Philippe! Promise me not to . . . to do anything rash."

There was a click. He had hung up.

All the lamps were on in the flat; most of the doors open. At every moment Paulette saw her reflected self in a glass, patted her hair, or drew her wrap together; for though it was five in the afternoon she had not yet dressed.

She picked up a big doll sprawling on the sofa, carried it to the nursery door, and tossed it into the room. A dozen times she was on the brink of tears, yet her eyes remained dry; nor, try as she might, could she shake off the feeling of oppression that weighed on her like a pall.

It was as wearing as a sleepless night, and she was conscious of being in a curious physical state, neither well nor ill. Still, her nerves seemed to be in order, for she managed to lie quite still on her bed for an hour, gazing at the ceiling. But then she started roaming the flat again, and she still was so little at home in it that only after pushing repeatedly at one of the doors, and even sup-

posing it to be locked, did she remember that it opened the other way, towards her.

A dozen times she halted at the telephone, only to turn away with a despondent gesture. There was no one she could think of to ring up, and really she had nothing to say. To make things worse, almost every room had a telephone installed—the idea was Philippe's, and Albert had adopted it, as he always copied Philippe's ideas—and wherever she went, the sleek black coil of a receiver met her eye.

It was six when she visited the kitchen and pantry, to make sure the servants were out. Then she locked, not only the front door, but the service door as well. Now and again she heard the lift going up or down, and each time she gave a start.

Her next move was to ring up her father-in-law, who answered the 'phone himself.

"Are the children still with you? . . . No, there's no hurry at all. I'm very busy trying to get the flat into some sort of order. Yes, certainly they can dine with you. . . . Thanks. Good night, father."

So the children were at the other end of Paris, where old Grindorge was still living, a hundred yards from the factory he had run up thirty years before, whose output of machine-tools had risen to be the second or third largest in France. And Albert was in the country, on the other side of Orléans.

With brisk, precise gestures—it was as if all her desultory movements had been leading up to this—Paulette opened a bookcase, not the one in the study but that in the smoking-room, which contained only bulky reference books, bound in red or green leather: dictionaries; directories, and the like. She took down a volume of the Encyclopedia, the one marked "*S—Tr*," and began reading, giving a slight start each time she heard the lift in motion.

"*Strychnine*. A highly poisonous vegetable alkaloid, C_{21}, H_{22}, N_2, O_2 Practically insoluble in water . . . specific effects upon the nervous system . . . Symptoms usually appear within twenty minutes of ingestion, starting with stiffness at the back of the neck and twitching of the muscles. . . . The patient is then seized with violent tetanic convulsions. . . . Death follows rapidly, consciousness being retained throughout."

She closed the book abruptly and replaced it on its shelf; then,

as if coming to a quick decision, took down another from the same group.

"Laudanum. A simple alcoholic tincture of opium. . . . The patient who has swallowed a lethal dose usually passes at once into the narcotic state. . . . Breathing becomes progressively slower and shallower, until finally it ceases altogether."

She could have sworn the lift had stopped at her floor, on which theirs was the only flat. Yet there was no ring. She went to the hall and pressed her ear to the door, but could hear nothing.

Still convinced that someone was lurking outside, she hurried to the bedroom, took Albert's revolver from a drawer, went back to the front door, flung it open, and switched on the landing light.

No one. Her nerves had tricked her. She bolted the door again and put back the revolver in the drawer with trembling hands, scared at the thought that she might easily have fired it without thinking.

She ate nothing. She had told the servants she was dining out. At nine there was a ring at the door, but at the same moment she heard her children's voices.

Why were they staring at her so queerly? Was there anything strange in her appearance? After kissing them she ran to the drawing-room and studied her face in a glass. All she noticed was that a strand of hair was falling down her cheek and her eyes had a peculiar fixity.

Her temples were throbbing; she was in for a bad headache.

When Albert came home at one in the morning, he was somewhat surprised to find a volume of the *Encyclopedia* lying open on the smoking-room table; but, giving no further thought to it, proceeded to take off his shooting-boots and put back his guns in the rack, while smoking a final cigarette.

Then, on tiptoe, though light was shining under the door, he entered the bedroom which he shared with his wife; for his father had been profoundly shocked when he spoke of their having separate rooms.

The bed had not been turned down, and Paulette, still in her

wrap, was lying across it, one slipper dangling from her bare foot. Her face was drawn, her breathing laboured, and she seemed to be in the throes of a bad dream.

IV

“MONSIEUR MICHEL DONADIEU wishes to know if he can see you, Madame.”

“Where is he?”

“In the hall.”

At another time Martine might have smiled at the thought of her brother waiting, gloves in hand, in an attitude that was certainly not bereft of dignity.

“Show him into the drawing-room, please.”

It was the Wednesday following that memorably rainy Sunday—when, so the newspapers declared, the rainfall had beaten the records of the last twenty years. There was a bite in the air, though winter had not yet definitely set in. As she walked across her room, Martine glanced at her clock; it was ten minutes past eleven.

“Good morning, Michel.”

As usual, she inclined her forehead for him to kiss—this was a family tradition; then she curled up in a corner of the sofa, drawing the edges of her dressing-gown over her legs.

“Keeping fit?” she asked, though really the question was misplaced. Not only his limbs, but his features too, had become almost shapeless, his chin buried in layers of fat.

“No,” he replied dolefully. “I’ve been anything but fit for the last month or so.”

Martine was only vaguely sorry for him. Actually he rather disgusted her, and she had a shrewd idea of the object of this visit; once again he wanted money. She could see him wondering how to steer the conversation round into a favourable channel.

“Have you come from Antibes?” Antibes was the last address he had given; but he had already moved several times, for the usual reason—that he had “got into trouble” with a girl.

"No. I'm staying at Cannes. The hotel's absurdly cheap, but they do one quite well, considering. . . . How's your husband?"

Just then the telephone-bell rang. With a languid gesture Martine reached out for the receiver.

"Yes? Who's that? Oh, good morning, Paulette. How are you?"

Unobservant though he was, Michel was startled by the change that had come over his sister; she had stiffened up, and her eyes, narrowed to pinpoints, were fixed on the carpet in a concentrated stare.

From the other end Paulette answered rather shakily:

"Quite well, thanks. Listen, dear! It's ages since we saw each other . . ."

"Ages?"

"Well, not since lunch on Wednesday. I've just been given four seats for the First Night of that new American film everybody's talking about. It's going to be a big show, people are paying fabulous prices for standing-room, I hear. . . . Hullo? Are you there?"

"Yes. When is it?"

"Tonight. Will you come?"

"I can't be sure if Philippe hasn't made another engagement. Ring him up and ask."

"I'd rather not."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't much care for ringing up men, especially at their offices. . . . He is in his office, isn't he?" Then on the spur of the moment she had a bold idea. "I've just remembered; I have to go to the Champs-Elysées this morning, and I'll drop in on Albert. . . . By the way, it's a full-dress show. Tails, glad rags, and all the rest of it. Bye-bye for the present, then."

Michel, who was still watching his sister, asked in a casual tone:

"Who was it?"

"Only someone asking us to a show this evening."

"As I was saying . . . But what on earth's come over you, Martine?"

"Nothing's come over me."

"Well, you're looking awfully pale. . . . Shall I leave you now, and come back later?"

"No, of course not. Tell me what you have to say."

"It's not so terribly urgent. But I've had some heavy bills to meet just lately, and I'm a bit short. Do you think you could persuade Philippe to give me an advance on the next half-year's allowance? Not an immense amount. Say, twenty thousand francs."

That "next half-year" was, as Martine knew, a euphemism. Philippe had already come to her brother's rescue several times, and the advance, if any, would be made on—at the earliest—the second period of the following year.

"Anyhow, I swear this is the last time I let a girl get me into her clutches," Michel blustered. "I'm through with women."

Usually Martine bore patiently with her brother's ways, but today—why, she had no idea—he literally nauseated her.

"You'd better tackle Philippe yourself."

"Why? Aren't you getting on together?"

"That's not it, but it would be better if this sort of request didn't always come from me."

Though Martine was giving her attention to this conversation, other thoughts were hovering in the background of her mind; memories of Paulette's voice on the telephone, of all sorts of trivial happenings of the last few days. Was Philippe sincere when, at meals, he adopted a cheerful tone and seemed to assume that all was forgiven, or forgotten? He had never again referred to that fateful afternoon, and refrained from speaking of Paulette, or even of going out with the Grindorges—which was a great change. . . . Michel's voice broke through her musings.

"He's not having trouble with his business, is he?"

"Not that I know of."

For the first time since he had come, Michel dropped the sycophantic, almost humble tone he had been using, and there was a hint of bitterness in his voice when he said:

"In that case, I don't see why he should make a fuss about advancing me a paltry twenty thousand. Any bank would do it

right off. If I apply to him, it's precisely because he mightn't care to have it known that his brother-in-law . . . ”

“Why not go and tell him that at the office ? ”

“I suppose you think I haven't the nerve to do it : But really he has no right to put on airs ; if he's a rich man now, it's thanks to us. And that's putting it in the kindest way. If one wanted to be nasty . . . ”

“Look here, Michel ! I suggest you go now.”

“Of course you *would* take his side.”

“I'm not taking his side. Only I don't like to hear you talking rubbish.”

“You call that rubbish ? Well, I defy you to deny that Philippe has, to all intents and purposes, turned us out of our own home.”

She eyed him with distaste. There were sallow half-moons under his eyes, grey hairs in his moustache, but in spite of the weather he was spick-and-span as a tailor's dummy, nor was there a particle of dust or mud on his shoes—which he still cleaned himself.

“Ask mother, Marthe, Olsen, anyone you like, what their views are.”

Michel had risen and was pacing the drawing-room, whose air of luxury seemed to add weight to his assertions.

“Shall I tell you once for all how I feel about it, Michel ? If I do, don't forget you were asking for it. . . . No, really we'd better drop the subject. All you have to do is to see Philippe in his office ; I'll be surprised if he refuses what you ask.”

“No. Tell me what you think. I'd rather know.”

“Have it your own way ! Well, my opinion is that, if Philippe hadn't stepped in, the Donadieu business would be in a worse way even than it is ; in fact, it would have passed out of the family's hands altogether. Papa had sized you up, and he never let you take the least initiative. I don't want to hurt your feelings and I won't go into details. As for Olsen, he has just brains enough to make a good chief clerk, and nothing more. And as for mother—well, she was full of good intentions, but after a few months of her régime she'd managed to get one of the best organized businesses in France into the most hopeless tangle one can imagine. So, for heaven's sake, don't start telling me that Philippe—”

"Naturally you stick up for your husband." Michel began hunting for his hat, which, as a matter of fact, he had handed to the valet on entering.

"I'm not sticking up for anyone or anything, but I loathe the sort of humbug you indulge in. I shouldn't be at all surprised if the real cause of father's death was that he simply despaired of the whole lot of us. . . . Well? Have you anything else to say to me?"

"Er—no. I don't think so."

"Then, *au revoir*. I must go to the nursery and see what Claude is up to."

All she had just said she meant—but she knew there was more to it than that. Indeed, the way she had put it garbled her real thoughts. Anyhow, Michel had brought it on himself; he should have chosen his moment better!

Once she was in her bedroom she picked up the receiver and called up the *R.M.C.*

"Put me on to Monsieur Dargens, please. . . . Yes? Is that you, Philippe? Sorry to disturb you at your work. . . . Is Paulette there, by any chance? Good. I want to speak to her."

"Hullo? Yes, it's me!" There was a nervous tremor in Paulette's voice.

"Look here! I forgot to ask you just now what colour you'll be in tonight—so that our dresses don't clash, you see."

She could have sworn that Philippe was listening in, with the other receiver to his ear, and that Paulette had turned to him with a questioning look. Quite likely he was whispering to her what dress to wear.

"Pale blue? Thanks. Remember me to Albert, won't you?"

She remained sitting by the telephone, knitting her brows—as she often sat for hours when Philippe was away.

". . . and Jesus laid his hands on them." For some time this fragment of the Gospel had been running in her head, and suddenly she knew the reason. If only one were beside her now, to lay his hand on her forehead; a cool, firm, healing hand! Everyone took her for a level-headed young woman—some even accused her of being "hard-boiled"; yet, under the surface, she felt things so

keenly that there were moments when she could have cried with pain.

Five minutes had not passed when she rang Philippe up again.

"I thought I'd better let you know. Michel is coming to see you. Yes, for the usual thing. Do as you please about it. . . . Is Paulette still there?"

He answered "No," but was she to believe him? And, even if it were true, there had been plenty of time for them to fix up another meeting.

It wasn't only that fragment of the Gospel that she had come to understand. She saw in a new light the visits Frédéric used to pay in the old days to the two women in her parents' house: first to Mme Donadieu, who confided to him all her small vexations; then to Eva in that exotic boudoir with the black curtains, where, squatting on cushions on the floor, they smoked endless cigarettes. . . .

But she was different; she wanted neither men nor women friends. She wanted—only Philippe!

They met in the American Bar of a café in the neighbourhood; their usual rendezvous when they were having a night out together. Paulette was in pale blue, the one colour she should have avoided, for it brought out the clumsiness of her figure and the greyness of her skin.

She had a habit of patronizing the same shops as Martine, and as it so happened, both were wearing ermine capes of almost the same model.

They had only a hundred yards to go from the bar to the picture-house, and they decided to walk. Albert stepped to Martine's side, and Philippe, after a brief hesitation that did not escape his wife, offered his arm to Paulette.

"Don't you think she's looking rather seedy?" Albert murmured in a tone of husbandly concern. I've been quite worried these last few days. You have so much influence on her, I wish you'd try to buck her up a bit."

For this gala night an awning had been run up across the pavement, and they entered the brilliantly lit lobby between two files of resplendent civic guards standing to attention. And then some-

thing nasty occurred, that took all four by surprise. There was a crowd, including the usual gate-crashers watching for their chance, and the employees checking the admission-cards and passes were on the alert.

Albert handed his two cards to a young man in a dinner-jacket, who promptly announced :

“Two seats in Box 5. Two stalls. This way.”

Noticing that Albert seemed rather flustered, Philippe intervened. “I’m Philippe Dargens of the *R.M.C.*,” he said in a peremptory tone. “There has been some mistake. We wish to sit together.”

“Can’t be managed,” said the young man, who was already inspecting another card.

“Excuse me. I must insist. . . . You heard my name?”

“Afraid I don’t know you. You’d better see the management.”

For the first time in several days Martine actually smiled. Then, when she saw how pale Philippe had gone at this rebuff, she felt a qualm of compassion.

Abruptly he turned on his heel and hurried to the box-office, where he had a colloquy with a man in full evening-dress, evidently someone in charge. Paulette naïvely remarked :

“What earthly difference can it make if we aren’t together while the picture’s on?”

Probably she was counting on being with Philippe while her husband sat beside Martine.

They waited for ten minutes, during which a dignified-looking man, probably the manager of the picture-house, appeared from a side door and could be seen confabulating earnestly with Philippe. But nothing could be done, it seemed ; every place was taken and, if they delayed, even the seats allotted them might be lost—so Philippe announced, in a voice rough with indignation.

And then, on their way to the wide marble staircase, Martine, with a quick, possessive gesture, took her husband’s arm, and said :

“We’ll sit in the stalls, Philippe. I like being near the screen, as you know. The Grindorges can have the seats in the box.”

It was too late for any discussion ; they were already entering the darkened auditorium, an usherette beckoning them forward with her flashlight.

Another attendant had pounced on the Grindorges and was guiding them to the staircase leading to the boxes. The film had started, and some of the audience protested when Philippe seemed to linger.

"Sit down, there!"

Martine was still trembling at her audacity. She could see Philippe's face in the backwash of brightness from the screen, and its look was ominous.

"Angry with me?" she whispered in his ear.

"No."

"What's wrong, then?"

"Nothing. . . . Don't talk, please."

Though their bodies were not in contact, somehow she felt that he was sitting bolt upright, every muscle braced, gazing ahead with unseeing eyes, indifferent to the bawlings of the black-and-white figures forming and fading on the screen. And she could picture Paulette, too, in the dress-circle box, snapping at her husband, twisting her handkerchief between her fingers.

When the first half was ending, before even the lights had gone up, Philippe rose and, without taking the least notice of his wife, or of the protests of the people in their row, walked to one of the Exits.

Martine had not been prepared for this. After a moment's indecision she followed him. But by now everybody was standing, and the gangways were so full that her progress was slow. She felt something like panic, the dismay of a child lost in a crowd.

Looking up to the boxes, she saw that the Grindorges, too, had left their seats, and she began looking for them in the foyer. The picture-house was one of the biggest in Paris and, this being a gala night, the foyer was packed with people. Hardly knowing what she was doing, Martine moved to and fro, murmuring now and then an "Excuse me!" as she pushed her way through a group. But there was no sign of Philippe or of the Grindorges.

For a moment she thought of sending for the car and going home, but she could not bring herself to leave, and went on looking for the others, till she felt a woman's hand on her arm.

"Hullo! Where were you?"

Paulette and Albert both seemed surprised at seeing her here by herself. Forgetting *amour-propre*, she asked impulsively:

"Haven't you seen Philippe?"

"No. We're looking for him. We thought he was with you. Have you any idea where he's gone?"

The interval was nearly over when at last they discovered Philippe at one of the bars, staring gloomily at the glass in his hand, which was trembling slightly.

"So that's where you were! We've been hunting for you high and low," said Albert breezily. He guessed there had been a tiff between Philippe and Martine.

"Yes, this is where I was."

After a glance at the whisky-and-soda he was holding, Martine said deliberately:

"I think I'll have a drink too. Barman, another whisky, please."

It was obvious by now to the Grindorges that under the surface a struggle was in progress. Martine did not care for spirits, and Philippe, who had been having trouble with his digestion, was on a diet which limited him to claret. All alcohol, whisky especially, was ruled out.

"What will you have?" he asked in a surly voice, turning to Paulette.

"Nothing, thanks. We'd better be getting back to our seats. It's time, Albert, isn't it?"

They left, and the bar rapidly emptied. Philippe ordered another whisky-and-soda.

"How many does that make?" Martine asked.

"Three."

Quite coolly she said to the barman:

"Two whiskies for me, please." And added, aside, to Philippe: "That'll put us level, won't it?"

She heard him draw a deep, sibilant breath, and saw his grip tighten on the brass rail of the bar till his knuckles showed white.

"Do you propose to stay here for the rest of the show?" she asked.

"Yes."

"In that case, I'm staying too."

He was holding himself in, but the effort was great. Twice his eyes settled on his wife, and she could see hatred in them. As for her, to all appearance she was perfectly at ease—though it was all she could do to keep on her feet.

Under her breath she whispered, a last appeal :

"Philippe!"

"Yes?"

"Don't you think we might go home now?"

"No."

"All right. Then we'll stay."

She could not get through the three whiskies. Ordering them had been mere bravado. After the first sips she felt quite sick.

The doors had been closed ; a faint sound of music came through them from the auditorium, then a ripple of applause when the producer's name was flashed on the screen.

"You're very unkind, Philippe."

That set him off, despite the presence of the barman, who, however, was tactful enough to retreat to the far end of the bar.

"Unkind! I like that! You insult me in public—and not me only, but our friends—and then you tell me I'm unkind. . . ."

"I only did it because I wanted to be with you."

"Well, you'd no business to do it. For one thing, they're our hosts tonight."

"Oh, come, Philippe! Don't exaggerate."

He gripped her arm roughly, and almost shouted in her face :

"Anyhow, I've had enough of it! Do you hear? Enough of it! You've been making my life unbearable these last days, and it's got to stop."

"What have I done?"

"Damn it! You know quite well. Do you imagine I don't realize what lies behind your air of . . . of disdainful calm? And to think you're going on like this just because I was silly enough to spend an afternoon with a woman in an hotel bedroom!"

"No, Philippe, that's not true."

"Well, what else have you got against me? . . . Anyhow, you should have more sense. She doesn't attract me in the least, she's

a complete dud—you know that as well as I do. Only, I happen to need her and her husband, and when she flung herself at me, I didn't dare to turn her down."

"You're hurting me, Philippe."

He released her arm. There was a red circle just above the wrist.

"Oh, I suppose it's easy enough to work oneself up into a state of idiotic jealousy when one has nothing to do all day, but—"

"Not so loud, please!" a voice said from the door communicating with the auditorium, where one of the cinema staff was standing, watching them.

But Philippe was beyond caring for appearances. Now that he had worked himself up, he was determined to vent his grievances to the end. There was a vicious edge to his voice, but, in curious contrast, an almost pleading look in his eyes.

"I'm aiming high, Martine, and I mean to get there, at all costs. I work like a galley-slave—twenty hours a day. And it's the hell of a struggle, I can assure you, keeping my end up. If I let go for a moment, everything would collapse like a card-castle. Because I give you all you ask, and I never tell you of my worries, I dare say you think it's all plain sailing. . . ."

Had Martine been unable to see his face, she might perhaps have let herself be impressed, but she could watch him, and, for all his accent of sincerity—perhaps the drinks had contributed to its effectiveness—she felt sure he was play-acting.

"Please don't say any more, Philippe. . . . Shall we go home now?"

"No."

"What do you propose to do?"

"The Grindorges have asked us to supper. I'm waiting for them."

"And what if I don't want to come?"

"That's your look-out. You can go home if you want to."

"Oh, Philippe!"

"No! It's no use whimpering 'Oh, Philippe!' I know what's in your mind. You're in terror I'm going to let myself go, and

make a scene. You keep looking at that damned fool at the door who said, 'Not so loud, please!'"

He was conscious, however, of growing calmer, and drank another whisky, trying to think up some pretext for another outburst.

"Let's take this opportunity of talking business for a change. You don't approve of that subject, do you? It's much too sordid for your ladyship. Money is such a vulgar thing—to make, anyhow; not to spend. Well, get this into your head; I'm in a nasty jam. Somehow or other I've got to lay hands on eight hundred thousand francs before the fifteenth of this month. And, if I haven't raised a million and a half within two months, the *R.M.C.* will have to go into liquidation. Does that mean anything to you? And, of course, this is the moment you *would* choose for pestering me with scenes of jealousy, trailing me wherever I go like a damned detective, pumping my chauffeur about my movements. No, it's no use shaking your head; I know all about it."

"Philippe!"

He gave a short laugh.

"This morning, for instance—really you overdid it. You rang me up twice within five minutes—in office—just because Paulette happened to be there. . . . Yesterday afternoon you called in with a cock-and-bull story of wanting a key that you knew quite well I hadn't got. How do you expect me to carry on with my work under such conditions? I have to keep my head clear and—"

"I'm going." She began to move in the direction of the cloak-room.

He grabbed her wrist again, even more roughly than before.

"No, you don't! And it's no use looking round like that. I'm not afraid of a scene. I don't care how many people see us—the more the merrier."

He gave her a venomous look. She lowered her head; tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"Please, Philippe, do try to calm yourself. Don't drink any more."

"Why not? I'm not drunk."

And, to humour him, she too had to act a part, to plead, to pretend to agree with what he said.

"No, you're not drunk, but . . . your nerves are bad tonight. Let's go back to our seats, or go home, whichever you prefer."

"No."

"I promise not to reproach you with anything."

"That's not it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'd rather you did. Ever since . . . since last Thursday you haven't had a word to say. You go about the flat looking very calm and dignified—much too much the grand lady to condescend to anything so vulgar as a quarrel. That wouldn't matter so much—but all the time you've been spying on me, watching everything I do, even the expression of my face! Yesterday you rang up Fouquet's—and you had absolutely nothing to tell me. It's come to this, that I can't take a step without wondering how it will be interpreted . . ."

"And, as a result, you don't dare to have any more meetings with Paulette," she added sadly.

"Damn it all! Haven't you understood even now, or must I start all over again from the beginning? I told you just now the position I'm in—about the *R.M.C.*, I mean."

A cold sweat was breaking out on her forehead, her cheeks were deathly pale. To steady herself she leant against the bar. But Philippe had no compassion.

"That's an old trick! When I say something you don't like, you pretend you're going to faint."

A spasm of almost physical nausea came over her, and she heard herself exclaim in a voice she hardly recognized:

"Oh, how I loathe you!"

But it wasn't true. It was the exact opposite of the truth. She hungered for him with every fibre of her being. And she stayed on, under the barman's pitying gaze, courting the risk of an even more painful outbreak—all to prevent his having a few moments alone with that miserable woman! So that's what I'm reduced to! she thought ruefully.

Meanwhile Philippe was indulging in an orgy of self-pity, and

he, too, felt like weeping! How unfair that a woman's senseless jealousy should stand between him and the realization of his ambitions!

"For six years," he said in a plaintive tone, "I've fought my way, inch by inch, to get where I am now. But the point I've reached is only a beginning; the real struggle lies ahead. And now her ladyship thinks fit to get on her high horse, because I . . . No, blast it all, you can't seriously imagine I get any pleasure out of sleeping with a creature like that—you've only got to look at her! That's why it's so ridiculous to be jealous; there's nothing to be jealous of." He was talking more to himself than to Martine, bewailing the injustice of his lot, his wife's incomprehension—yet all the time he was lying, or, rather, garbling the truth.

It was true that, as he said, he never spared himself and sacrificed all to his ambition; but he failed to add, what Martine knew only too well, that he was quite prepared to sacrifice her, too, when the time came—if, indeed, he had not done so already.

A tumult of clapping hands and "Bravos!" poured in; all the padded doors had opened simultaneously.

"Listen, Philippe. I'm awfully tired, and I'm not feeling at all well. Let's go home."

"Go home if you want to."

"For the last time I beg you; do, please, let's go. If you've any pity . . ."

"And for the last time I tell you to go home if you want to."

Hastily he drained the whisky in his glass, then started looking for the Grindorges with an air of studied casualness, though he seemed a little unsure of his movements. Martine tried to keep him in sight amongst the crowd. . . .

"Where were you? We've been hunting for you everywhere."

"Oh, Martine was feeling a bit tired." Philippe had promptly recovered his aplomb.

"Sorry to hear that, Martine. Will you be going home?"

"No."

Her "No" sounded like a threat.

"Would you get our things from the cloak-room, Albert?"

They had supper at Maxim's. As usual on such occasions, Philippe got up several times in the course of the meal, to shake hands with people he knew. Watching him, Martine could see that his nerves were in a bad state, but the signs were too slight to be noticed by others.

She felt as if all the vitality had been drained out of her. Her head was aching and waves of nausea kept surging up, so much so that when the meal was over she had to hurry to the Toilet, where she was sick. She would have given much for a breath of fresh air, but had resolved to see it through. As she was redressing her make-up in front of the glass, she felt sure that Philippe had taken this opportunity of asking Paulette to dance with him.

Her intuition was correct. When she opened the door, Paulette, to whom Philippe was talking in a low voice, squeezed his arm and whispered :

“Be careful. Your wife’s back.”

Martine could not hear, but she had seen Paulette’s glance, and guessed what she had said. Slowly she crossed the dance-floor to their table. Albert was smoking a cigarette.

“Don’t you think she’s looking a bit better ?” he said to Martine. “These last few weeks she’s been off colour—I expect you’ve noticed it too—moody at some moments and over-excited at others ; in fact, I’ve been quite worried. I only hope it doesn’t mean another baby’s on the way.”

“Yes, indeed let’s hope so.” Martine’s tone was so strange that Albert gave her a puzzled, rather anxious look.

The dance ended, Philippe slumped heavily into his chair and, though they were Albert’s guests, beckoned to the head-waiter.

“The bill, please.”

“But . . .”

“Sorry, Albert, but I really must go home. I’ve been feeling rather seedy all the evening, and that dance . . .”

But it was not the dance that had upset him. It was what Paulette had whispered, with an almost crazy look in her eyes, when they were at the far end of the dance-floor :

“You remember what you said to me ?”

When he pretended not to follow, she became explicit.

"Are you quite sure you'd marry me if . . . ?"

At the moment he had been strangely shaken, and he could not now recall if he had said anything, or merely nodded.

V

"Come in, Frédéric. I hope you're not angry with me for taking you away from your work?"

"Not in the least. I've never much to do till five."

"Have a cigar."

The day was Saturday. A time was to come when they would try to recall each date, and fix the sequence of events in its right order. But there was little likelihood that anyone, with the possible exception of Frédéric, would succeed in doing that.

It was the Saturday following that memorably rainy Sunday and Mme Donadieu's meeting with Martine at Frédéric's flat; following also the gala night at the cinema and the supper-party at Maxim's. There would be no difficulty in getting the week right, anyhow, for every newspaper had photographs of floods in the Paris suburbs, of firemen in boats rescuing people from half-submerged houses, of a village in the Rhone district threatened by a landslide—not to mention the usual picture of the "Zouave" statue beside the Pont de l'Alma, the Parisian's gauge for measuring the height of the Seine in flood-time.

The incessant rain had ended by affecting everybody's nerves. It had lasted too long; one was sick of living in an atmosphere of perpetual moisture.

"Why don't you take a cigar?"

"I'm off smoking. Doctor's orders, you know."

"Oh, once in a way won't harm you. And I'll open a bottle of some excellent Bordeaux I've just laid in."

Actually, Mme Donadieu was all eagerness to launch into her subject. But it was a time-honoured custom, and she could not bring herself to break with it. In the La Rochelle days the Donadieus had few callers, but when one came, even if he were a mere commercial traveller, cigars and a wine or liqueur were invariably

produced. There were, however, several varieties of cigar, graded to the status of the visitor.

"Perhaps I oughtn't to have rung you up. But all this morning I've been feeling dreadfully worried. First, please tell me if you've seen anything of Martine or Philippe lately."

"Not since Sunday." To please his hostess, Frédéric had lit a cigar.

The room had a dignity unusual in flats, thanks to its tall windows and the antique furniture Mme Donadieu had brought from La Rochelle.

"I can't imagine what's happening," she continued, "but I feel sure there's something wrong. I rarely let a day go by without ringing up Martine and having a chat with her. Somehow I find it does me good, and anyhow I like to keep in touch. After that, I think over what's she said, and try to picture what she's doing at her place. Well, yesterday morning I rang her up three times, at the time I know she's always in, and her maid told me she was out. I felt so uneasy that I called up Philippe at his office, though I know he hates being disturbed there. He told me he was positive Martine was in; in fact, he'd been talking to her on the 'phone a few minutes before."

Frédéric found his attention straying from what Mme Donadieu was telling him, to her appearance, which produced a queer impression on him. She was seated in such a way that her face showed just beside an enlarged photograph of Kiki, taken a month before he disappeared. As often in enlargements of a snapshot, the profile was indistinct, and indeed the whole face had a curious evanescence. And now it struck Frédéric that Mme Donadieu's face, seen in this uncertain light, had something of the same wraith-like quality. He was starting to calculate her age, when a mention of his son brought his thoughts back to what she was saying.

"I quite understand that Martine has her own interests and anxieties, and mayn't always feel inclined to chatter to her old mother. But yesterday morning I thought that Philippe's voice sounded rather strange. So I decided to risk it, and went to the Avenue Henri-Martin—in all that pouring rain too!"

"Did you see her?"

"The butler said he'd see if she was in. But I'm positive I heard Martine's voice before he came and told me she was out.

"This morning I rang her up again, with no result. When I 'phoned to Philippe, all he said was that he simply didn't understand, but that when Martine was out of sorts she often behaved rather oddly. I can't help feeling there may be something seriously wrong. What's your idea, Frédéric?"

A difficult question to answer. Frédéric was aware that all was not well between his son and Martine; Philippe had told him of that incident at the hotel in the Rue Cambon, and of Martine's jealousy. And he, too, was alarmed at the turn things were taking.

"Oh, I expect they've had a tiff." He felt it up to him to comfort his old friend as best he could.

"Don't answer if you'd rather not. Anyhow, there's something else I'd like to ask, and I hope you won't mind telling me just what you think. Do you consider Philippe's business is sound?"

"That depends on what you mean by 'sound.' There's no knowing, really. One sometimes sees a well-established, conservative firm come a financial cropper, while a speculative business like Philippe's forges steadily ahead."

"But don't you feel anxious sometimes? Please remember that I've nothing against Philippe and his methods. He's built like that."

Though it was only three in the afternoon, the light was failing.

"Oh well," sighed Mme Donadieu, "at my age it's no use worrying. . . ." She turned and gazed at Kiki's portrait. "If only I could see the boy—just once again!" Her eyes grew misted. "Isn't it extraordinary that we've never been able to find out anything about him? Philippe must have spent a small fortune trying to trace him, and I must say I'll always be grateful to him for that, whatever he may do."

"It's seldom that young fellows who disappear like that are traced," Frédéric observed.

"Why?"

"Because there are too many of them. There's little the police can do, really, especially when they've gone abroad."

"But why doesn't Kiki write? That's another thing in Philippe's

favour. When Kiki vanished, he insisted on my taking his share, in full. Very decent of him, wasn't it?"

Ingenuously the old lady confounded money matters with questions of the heart—as indeed had always been the practice of the Donadieus.

"I'm wondering," she continued, "what sort of arrangement will be made next month—for the final settlement of the estate, I mean. Michel dropped in yesterday, and he assured me that a declaration by the Court that Kiki is untraceable will be enough."

The room was full of dusk. The two wine-glasses stood empty on a squat Empire table. When a clock struck four, Frédéric rose. Mme Donadieu had wept a little, and was nervously squeezing her handkerchief as she saw Frédéric out and switched the light on in the hall.

"Do please let me know at once if . . . if you hear anything. Remember me to Odette."

Unexpectedly, she found herself smiling as she went back to her chair. The mention of Odette's name had recalled a remark Michel had made with reference to Frédéric.

"Is that girl still living with him?"

His mother had noticed an undertone of rancour in his tone, and guessed he hoped to hear that they had parted. He was hardly less jealous of Frédéric than of Philippe; both father and son, to his thinking, had trespassed on his preserves.

Next morning, when Mme Donadieu rang up her daughter's flat, the butler promptly replied :

"They're both out for the day, Madame—at a shoot." And for once he was telling her the truth.

This Sunday was almost as wet as its predecessor, and the two cars, the Grindorges' and Philippe's, were travelling, one behind the other, through heavy rain-squalls. Albert was himself at the wheel; he had never dared to engage a chauffeur, because of his father, who strongly disapproved of a man's not driving his own car if capable of doing so. Paulette, in the seat beside him, looked more run down than ever, and when he tried to start a conversation, promptly shut him up, saying she wished to sleep.

"Yes, do have a short nap ; it may do you good. I'd like you to be in form when we're with Pomeret."

For the Minister of Education, with whom they had lunched at Martine's flat, had consented to join the party, after being assured there would be only the five of them, and everything would be quite informal. Despite appearances he was a shy man—he had started his career as a schoolmaster—and, as far as possible, eschewed society functions.

He was beside Martine at the back of Philippe's car. Philippe, who sat facing them, had dark rings round his eyes, like a man who has been sleeping badly. Nevertheless, he did his best to keep the conversation going.

"Look ! We're just coming to the end of it. You remember that farmhouse I showed you a quarter of an hour ago. Well, all the cornfields we've been passing since then belong to Grandmaison. I should say he owns about a third of the La Beauce cornland. Have you ever met him ?"

"No," the Minister confessed ; as a matter of fact, it amazed him to learn that a third of La Beauce, the "granary of France," was in the hands of a single man.

"I should say that he and his family are the 'safest' millionaires in the country at the present time. All their money's in land."

Martine, who was watching Philippe's face, repressed a smile, less of irony than of sympathetic understanding. She had been struck by the way he'd said, "All their money's in land."

How mistaken people were who regarded him as a born gambler, who enjoyed walking a financial tight-rope ! There had been a glint of envy in his eyes when he uttered those words, "in land." She had seen that look before, when they were visiting the big cities of Europe.

At one of the hotels where they stayed he had drawn his wife's attention to a rather oddly shaped whisky-bottle placed in a prominent position on the bar.

"Just think, Martine ! We might drop into bars in China, Australia, South America, or even North Alaska—and everywhere we should see a bottle of that brand of whisky well to the fore. It makes one think, doesn't it ?"

No, Martine smiled, it didn't make her think; and she disliked whisky, anyhow!

"Don't you see what I mean? Think of the number of bottles of that particular make which are consumed every day. Think of the thousands and thousands of cases of it that are being shipped all the time to every corner of the world. And, mind you, it's a one-man show; there's a fellow in England who's raking in the profits, thousands of pounds a day coming in from everywhere. That's what I call a big concern, something to be proud of."

The road was in bad repair, and their heads were constantly jogged from side to side. Soon after they had passed Pithiviers the chauffeur drew back the glass panel to ask which turning to take. Philippe couldn't remember, and they had to wait till the Grindorges caught them up.

After that, Albert drove in front. They had started before sunrise, as the men of the party had been unable to leave Paris on the previous day. Now the sun was up; men with guns on their shoulders could be seen trudging through stubble-fields and along the grassy verges of the road. As they drove through villages, they met groups of people coming from early service.

"It's interesting, isn't it? Weil, 'Flour' Weil, as everyone calls him, has control, direct or indirect, over all the corn that's milled in France. Not a grain escapes him."

Martine marvelled at his composure. How could he appear so calm, talk so easily on trivial subjects, after the emotional crisis he had been through so short a while before? As for her, she was quite incapable, especially after getting up at five in the morning, of making small-talk.

It was a relief when, after crossing a hamlet lost in the forest, they turned right into a spacious drive leading to a rather dreary-looking château, even less imposing than that of Esnandes—which at last the family had brought themselves to sell, as not being worth its keep.

Albert, who had bought this château in the previous year, could not refrain from pointing out to the Minister the traces of a coat-of-arms emblazoned on the doorway. Under it was a time-worn

date, ANNO MDC . . . ; the final figures were effaced. But amongst the crumbling scroll-work Albert professed to distinguish three inverted *fleurs-de-lys*, and announced that he was going to have researches made.

The queerest thing was that four out of the five would have been quite unable to explain why they were here. The weather was atrocious and, hemmed in by the huge trees of the Forest of Orléans, the place was even darker and damper than the house at Esnandes. As all the game had already been shot off in the five or six acres of fields belonging to the estate, the men had to make their way into the woods, where every step brought down a shower of drops of icy water.

The gamekeeper was surly, the dogs seemed half asleep, and, as it so happened, all the rabbits were put up near the Minister, who invariably missed them.

This expedition to the country had been organized at a few hours' notice. On the Saturday morning there had been no question of it, and Albert proposed to devote his Sunday to reading a book on statistics that he had been keeping in reserve for such an occasion. And, since the Friday evening, Philippe had been in such a vile humour that his staff went about their work in fear and trembling. Martine was sulking—that, anyhow, was how Philippe described her persistent seclusion in her bedroom or in the nursery. She had always been an affectionate mother, but not to the point of staying with her small son from morn till night, or suddenly deciding to undertake the task of teaching him to read.

What, then, had induced the four of them to rise in the dark, and endure a sixty-mile journey in the rain, with the sole object of floundering ankle-deep in mud and lunching uncomfortably in a lugubrious château ?

No sooner had they got there than Paulette said to Martine with affected cheerfulness :

“ Make yourself at home, dear. You can have the run of the whole place—we haven’t any secrets ! Only I must ask you to excuse me for a bit while I see about our luncheon.”

Martine did not even wonder how to spend her morning. On entering the drawing-room she had noticed a sofa upholstered in

pale pink, and had settled—or, rather, dropped like a log—upon it. Now she was lying on her back, gazing idly at the branch of a cedar-tree that hung athwart the window. Various sounds came to her, and some of them she identified, but languidly, without real interest.

There was, for instance, the crackle of burning pine-cones; the air in the room was heavy with their warm, aromatic smell. A woman was talking in the kitchen, grumbling because no truffles had been brought to serve with the fowls. Now and again Martine heard the thud of a gun-shot, the bark of a dog.

She gave herself to a day-dream, following up the thoughts and pictures floating through her mind. That bottle of whisky, for example. That was what Philippe would have wished to be, the manufacturer of that whisky, or the owner of a third of La Beauce, or anyhow of a business as substantial as the Donadieu's had been in her father's time, but on a far larger scale.

Really, there was more in common between the outlook of those two, her father and Philippe, than one would have imagined. Only, where Philippe used the term "dynasty," Oscar Donadieu had spoken of "the family," in much the same respectful tone as a statesman uses when mentioning the Royal House.

Another gun-shot. Martine seemed to see a rabbit rolling over, pawing the air in its death-agony.

Then another picture floated up into consciousness: that of the poster of a popular tooth-paste, which Philippe had pointed to one day.

"Do you know how much they spend in advertising every year, with one agency alone? Ten million francs!"

Which brought back to her another remark of his, referring to a well-known laxative:

"Eight million of those pills are taken every day."

Only, as he always said regretfully, to work up businesses like these to full capacity, it takes three generations, or an initial capital of tens of millions.

"It was through Charlotte that I forced my way into the Donadieu household . . ."

She heard his voice across the crackling of the pine-cones, which were shooting volleys of red sparks across the hearth. Twice Paulette looked in.

"Not too bored, all by yourself?"

No, she wasn't bored. She wanted to think. She had done little else for the last three days, but there seemed no limit to her capacity for thought.

"It was through Charlotte . . ."

And suddenly she had a morbid craving to evoke cruel, sordid pictures, such as that of Philippe and Charlotte in the wet darkness of Mme Brun's garden, locked in a crude embrace. But quickly this phase passed and, yielding to a gentler mood, she recalled Philippe in his moments of affection, when his voice lost its harshness and his eyes glowed softly as he drew her lips to his.

He was only thirty, and yet he had already created, almost out of nothing, a setting for his life that anyone might envy: the flat in the Avenue Henri-Martin, his luxurious offices in the Champs-Elysées. And, if Michel could now lead idle days on the Riviera, running after chambermaids to his heart's content; if Mme Donadieu now was living in a comfortable flat in Paris—this again was Philippe's work. All this, as he had reminded her on that unforgettable night when he had dropped the mask of self-control and spoken out his mind—all this he had achieved single-handed. After all . . .

For a while she reproached herself for judging him so harshly, and an almost tender smile hovered on her lips. But presently it faded, her eyes grew hard.

Why should she be added to the list of his victims? For, in a flash of cruel insight, she realized that the people whom she had been recalling were not mere puppets whom Philippe had manipulated to serve his ends; they were living victims he had immolated to his star. All of them—from Charlotte to Michel, to Albert Grindorge . . .

As for her, she refused to be another Charlotte. Definitely, with all the will-power in her, she refused!

“ANOTHER VICTIM OF MOLEBANE

“A lamentable case of poisoning is reported from the Chenerailles district. M. Eugène Terret, a gardener employed at the Château d’Orgnac, after preparing a paste for the destruction of moles with the well-known poison known as Molebane, omitted to wash his hands before picking and eating a tomato. Half an hour later, feeling severe griping pains, he hurried to the doctor, who administered an antidote. It was too late, however, and, like Mme Fauveau, the Parisian fireman’s wife, whose death was reported in these columns last week, he rapidly succumbed, in excruciating agony.”

This paragraph had appeared in the Saturday morning paper, before there had been any talk of making up a party for a shoot on the following day. At eleven, the newspaper still lying on her dressing-table, Paulette rang up her husband.

“That you, Albert? Look here, I’ve just remembered there are some winter pears at Chenevières that we ought to pick before the frost gets them.”

He mumbled something, and his wife continued :

“I suggest we go there tomorrow, and combine it with a little shoot. . . . Are you listening?”

“Yes.”

“You remember Monsieur Pomeret, the Education Minister? You rather liked him, didn’t you? Ask him to join us. And of course the Dargenses would come too. Do try to fix it up.”

“All right. I’ll see what can be done.”

“Yes, do. It will be such a nice change. I’ve been so terribly bored lately.”

Albert had promptly gone to Philippe’s office.

“My wife’s very keen on going to Chenevières tomorrow, and she wants you and Martine and Pomeret to come along. I’m not particularly struck with the idea, but she’s been in such a nervous state these last few days that I don’t want to disappoint her.”

Philippe’s face darkened ; he was silent for a moment.

Then, “You’d better ring up Pomeret,” he said, “and see how he feels about it.”

“Couldn’t *you* ring him up?”

"I'm too busy."

On coming home he said to Martine :

"I think we shall be going to Chenevières tomorrow, for a shoot."

"I shan't go."

There was a look of challenge in the eyes of both, as often in these last days. Philippe repeated :

"We're going to Chenevières tomorrow. If you want to know why, I'll tell you. Pomeret's coming."

"In that case—all right!"

It was better to give in; otherwise Philippe would lose his temper again, as he had done at the cinema, and accuse her of making difficulties, wrecking his career for a mere caprice.

"And you might try to be a bit more amiable."

"To whom?"

"To everyone. Do you know, your mother's called me twice to say you always have her told you're out when she rings up?"

"I didn't feel like talking."

He clenched his fists. Ten times in the last two days they had been on the brink of a violent dispute. Martine conjured up a smile.

"Don't worry, Philippe. I'll make myself as amiable as you could wish."

So now they were at Chenevières. Neither had the least inkling that they owed this ill-timed, indeed pointless, shooting-party to a casual article in the paper.

Pomeret was full of excuses for his bad markmanship. Philippe had shot two rabbits and a pheasant, while Albert, who had still brought down nothing, tried to turn off his discomfiture with more or less feeble jokes.

The gamekeeper had evidently had other plans for his Sunday; he was barely polite, and made a point of taking them by paths where they had constantly to wriggle under barbed-wire fences.

Meanwhile Paulette was behaving so oddly that Naomi, the gamekeeper's wife, who acted as cook on these occasions, followed her with her eyes wherever she went, now and again murmuring plaintively :

"I'd much rather you let me do the work by myself, Madame."

But Paulette pretended not to hear; she seemed determined to lend a hand, and even began to pluck a chicken, making a complete hash of it. She also seemed determined to keep up the conversation.

"Are you still quite happy here, Naomi? I'm afraid you must have had a dreadful week, what with all this rain."

"I'd have been happier if we could have had this Sunday off, seeing as my husband's brother's come all the way from Orléans to see us today. He's in the cottage now, and fair sick he must be, left by himself like that."

"Ask him to come along here. He can have his lunch with you in the kitchen."

"Maybe he wouldn't want to. He's a lorry-driver, and a bit independent-like, if you see what I mean. Now, Madame, you'd better leave me to myself; I get along with my work better when there's nobody about."

Paulette complied, but ten minutes later she was back. She gave the impression of someone who dreads being left alone.

"Tell me, Naomi. Are there many rats here?"

"Rats? Not that many, I don't think."

"But there are some, aren't there?"

"Oh, there's sure to be some in a big house like this. But we don't take no notice."

Paulette filled herself a glass of water. Her hands were trembling so much that it slipped through her fingers and broke on the floor. She gazed at the broken glass with a dismay that seemed out of all proportion to its cause. "It's plain glass," Naomi observed. "That means good luck."

With an effort Paulette pulled herself together.

"How about the sweet, Naomi? Have you got one ready?"

"You know quite well I haven't had no time. If you wanted a sweet, why couldn't you have brought one with you? But no, you never thought of that. You didn't even think of bringing some chocolates for my little girl, like you said you would next time you came."

"Next Sunday I'll bring some. I promise you I won't forget again."

She went out, hurried back again, and had some more rambling talk with Naomi. Her cheeks had a cadaverous pallor, and each time there was a shot outside she gave a nervous start.

"The woman's daft," Naomi muttered to herself.

In her aimless roamings Paulette always halted at a certain spot, hesitated for a moment, then turned and walked quickly away.

It was at the end of a passage paved with blue-grey flagstones. A rarely used door opened on the yard, and from it one could cross directly to the wash-house without passing through the kitchen or scullery. As the washing was now done in the yard itself, under a tap, the wash-house had been converted into a store-room, where objects of all kinds, cartridge-bags, shoulder-belts, the white coats used by the beaters, fox-traps, and the like were kept.

There was an immense fireplace, with a very long mantelpiece above it. It was here that a fortnight earlier, when planning a general tidying-up of the ground-floor rooms, Paulette had noticed some dusty bottles, dating no doubt from the time of the previous owners of the château, and, amongst them, a small brown jar labelled—she was almost certain—"Molebane."

She could not decide if she had better go to the wash-house through the kitchen or by the door at the end of the passage. Her mind was curiously lucid, yet somehow her thoughts seemed out of her control, though they followed each other with logical precision. As she moved restlessly from room to room, the lines in the newspaper and the label on the jar stood out before her, like captions on a screen. And it was as if the jar had become something that she must procure for its own sake, and she had forgotten why she needed it.

The frantic days she had been living through in Paris, when she would toss for hours on her bed, or pass into a sort of waking dream in which all manner of fantastic schemes raced through her mind, were ended. That scheme, for instance, of filing half-way through an axle of her husband's car or tampering with the nuts on one of the wheels. Absurd, on the face of it. Were she to go to the garage and start tinkering with the car, somebody would be

sure to ask what she was up to. And, in any case, Albert always drove so slowly, he would come to no great harm.

Then she had thought of going to some small chemist's shop in the suburbs and asking for a bottle of laudanum. No, that, too, was impracticable; he wouldn't let her have it, most likely, and, if he did, he might remember her face. She must think of something else. . . .

Her brain had gone racing on like a machine out of all control, and there had been no stopping it. For she had not only worked out each successive scheme down to its smallest detail, but thought out the consequences: what she would have to say to her friends, and to the police who questioned her; the funeral arrangements, even the mourning she would need to buy. And yet, amazingly, in all the fever of those vision-haunted hours, she had managed, outwardly, to appear quite calm.

During these periods of intense cerebration, which lasted sometimes only a few minutes, and sometimes went on for hours, she was in a sort of trance, on coming out of which she felt as vacant and exhausted as an addict after an orgy of his drug. So much so that when Albert came home she hardly knew if he were the Albert of her dream or the living Albert, her husband, in flesh and blood.

"You should take things easy for a while," he counselled. "How about calling in the doctor?"

She shook her head.

"Well, if you won't rest, try anyhow to amuse yourself a bit, instead of moping in the flat. Ask Martine to go out with you."

For peace' sake she had said, "All right."

And now the bottle of Molebane was only a few yards away, on the other side of that wall. She went back to the kitchen. Naomi heaved a prodigious sigh, as if she were trying to empty her enormous breasts, and scowled.

"Have the winter pears, the ones on the espalier, been picked?"

"Dunno. Maybe my husband's picked them."

"Give me a basket, please."

"Can't you see it's raining cats and dogs?"

"I'll wear a mack."

"You'd better put on gum-boots too," advised Naomi, handing her the basket sulkily.

Paulette looked into the drawing-room on her way.

"Sure you don't mind my deserting you? I'm going out to pick some pears. Won't you come?"

"Thanks," Martine said. "I'd rather stay here."

Paulette had blushed; she'd almost made a slip—said "tomatoes" instead of "pears." Because of the paragraph in the paper, of course. That wretched man had eaten tomatoes. This time it would be pears.

"I'll have some port sent in."

"Don't bother. It's so nice and warm here. I'm quite comfy. But you might tell your maid to put some more logs on the fire."

Paulette herself put the logs on, so as not to return to the kitchen.

"Are you quite sure there's nothing you'd like, dear?"

Paulette was conscious that no one wanted her, neither Martine nor Naomi—but she did not care.

"Well, I'll go and pick those pears for lunch," she repeated deliberately.

The espaliers flanked the kitchen-garden wall. As she approached, she heard dogs barking less than five hundred yards away, and the last shots of the day were fired quite near the wall, where a hare had taken cover in a tangle of grass and nettles. Pomeret had the first shot, but Philippe fired a second later and bowled the hare over, while Albert was just beginning to take aim.

VI

"DONAD!" said Mrs Goudie severely, and, as if incapable of further speech, or preferring to keep it for weightier occasions, shot a pointed glance, first at the paper the young man was reading as he lounged against the sideboard, then at his vacant chair beside the dining-table.

The young man addressed as "Donad"—he was so tall as to make people turn to stare at him in the street—blushed, stammered an apology and, pushing the paper into his pocket, hastened, with

an awkwardness due as much to shyness as to his lanky limbs, towards the empty chair. On his right sat Davidson, a veteran of the Four Years' War, and on his left Mrs Hirst, the fastest typist in Big Hole City, and also the swarhiest; the black down on her upper lip was thicker than the moustache on Donad's.

Once at table, none of the eight men and three women said a word. They were here to eat, not to babble. The hired girl brought in a soup-tureen, and each in turn passed up his or her plate to Mrs Goudie, who plied her ladle with the skill that comes of constant practice.

The soup was promptly followed by an Indian-corn pudding, and now was the time to keep watch, covertly of course, on one's neighbour's plate. The tall, shy young man did this with the utmost discretion, but he could not help casting an envious glance at Davidson, who, as chance would have it, got the largest helping. To console himself, he reflected that there might well be some left over, in which case Mrs Goudie might say, as she often did:

"Donad shall have it. He's the biggest of you all, and he's a growing lad. What's more, he works the hardest."

The trouble was that today, because his paper had arrived, he had been slow in taking his place at table, and was probably in Mrs Goudie's black books.

Not until the last mouthful of pudding had been disposed of, and they were rolling up their napkins and slipping them into rings, did anyone think fit to speak. There was a sudden bustle as all rose at once, some going upstairs to their bedrooms, while others moved into the parlour, where there was a piano, and a gramophone.

By common consent Mrs Goudie's boarding-house was quite the best establishment of its kind in Big Hole City. For one thing, it was a brick house, whereas nearly all the other houses in the township were of wood. Also, as there was room for only eleven lodgers, one had to wait till someone left, not to book a room, but to submit an application for one, with due form and ceremony. For Mrs Goudie, who was a model of rectitude, insisted on references from intending boarders.

Thus "rough houses" were unknown under her roof. No

drinking of strong liquor was allowed, and smoking was tolerated only in the parlour, as Mrs Goudie disapproved of tobacco-smoke in the bedrooms no less than in the dining-room.

"Let's have a page," young Donad said to a shorter and more sparely built young fellow seated beside him on the sofa, and they both settled down to reading the Paris newspaper that had come by that morning's mail.

The atmosphere of the boarding-house was as restful as that of a convent or a museum. The dark-hued, impersonal furniture of the parlour contributed to the lethargic influence of the after-dinner hour, inducing a gentle coma of no thoughts.

Edmond ventured, as he read, to smoke a cigarette, but Donad—as he was now called because it made his name sound more American—had as much aversion for tobacco as for strong drink and light women.

Outside it was blowing up for a gale, perhaps a hurricane. Now and again the young man would raise his head, listen to the gusts, and heave a sigh.

"Did you manage all right at the fourth pylon?" his companion asked as he started a new page of the newspaper.

"Yes. I stuck it out till the whistle went."

Big Hole City was not a town, strictly speaking, but a mushroom growth of shacks and warehouses that had sprung up almost in a night. It lay at the foot of a vast barrage-dam that was being erected to divert a river and also to supply power for a hydro-electric plant that was to be the biggest in the world.

For three years an army of American, Italian, and German workmen, foremen, engineers, and office employees, had been living here, all their activities and interests centered on the slowly rising wall, and it was estimated that another three years' work still lay ahead.

Edmond was employed in one of the draughtsmen's offices, and Donad, had he so wished, could have procured similar employment. But he was set on doing manual labour, the harder the better. Often, at the close of the day's work, though he had an appetite as keen as his brother Michel's, he was so exhausted that he went straight to bed without an evening meal.

His worst struggle, especially when the dam had reached a certain height, was to conquer a tendency to dizziness. Only to Edmond had he spoken of this weakness, and none of his fellow-workers had noticed the greenish pallor of his cheeks as he edged his way along a plank a hundred feet above ground level, or straddled the hook of a crane swinging him high in air.

“Read this.”

If, instead of a khaki shirt and shorts, Donad had been wearing some loosely fitting brown garment, he would have made a splendid model for a monk in a stained-glass window, with his great stature and the look of mystic exaltation on his gaunt young face. Everyone thought him as strong as an ox, and took good care not to ruffle his temper, though actually, if he had his father’s build, his body had the softness of Michel’s and his mother’s.

“What do you want me to read?”

“Look at the bottom of the ‘Personal’ column.”

Without the least sign of interest he read :

“*Re Oscar Donadieu, Shipowner, La Rochelle, deceased. Maître Goussard, attorney-at-law, La Rochelle, requests M. Oscar Donadieu, now aged 21, to communicate with him at once.*”

“That’s so! I’ve just come of age,” murmured Donad, as though this fact struck him now for the first time.

“What shall you do about it?”

“Nothing, of course. What did you expect me to do?”

Wasn’t he perfectly happy at Big Hole City, where he had settled into a groove that fitted him perfectly? Like the others, he was roused from sleep by the blast of a hooter, and presently hurried downstairs to join his fellow-workers at Mrs Goudie’s breakfast-table. Like the others, he wore a khaki shirt and shorts, gum-boots and oilskins, and on his way to the yards swung his shoulders to the same rhythm as theirs, and made the same gesture when he clocked in.

Then came the grim but glorious struggle to control his nerves while he was being hoisted to the dizzy summit. And how wonderful, almost ecstatic, was his joy when another blast of the hooter signalled release, his ordeal ended!

"Don't you ever feel you'd like to go back?" Edmond asked.

"Certainly not. Do you?"

"No, of course not," Edmond answered, a shade too quickly. "But it's different for me. You are a rich man. In two or three years' time the dam will be finished, and . . ."

"But there'll be other dams to build, won't there?"

In a sense, his life was dedicated to the building of the dam, and no other interest could compete with it. And he was not the only one. That huge, imposing structure slowly rising from the valley dominated the thoughts no less than the activities of the army of workers serving its ascent. Few of them troubled to know the latest news from New York or Chicago, and if one sometimes heard a grumble over the weather, this was not due to the hardships it imposed on workers in the open, but because the autumn rains might cause a landslide, or early frost play havoc with the unset concrete.

For Donad's leisure hours there was the comfortable warmth of Mrs Goudie's parlour, and, three times a week, a "Social" organized by the local minister.

This evening such a gathering was taking place, and at five minutes to eight Edmond and Donad put on their caps and set out for the meeting-house. On their way they passed a tavern where a concertina was being played, and one had glimpses of women sitting at a bar. Donad gave them a brief glance, and shook his head sadly, but made no comment.

Standing on the threshold of the barnlike room where the Socials took place, the Rev. Cornelius Hopkins shook hands with each new arrival, calling him by his Christian name and adding some words of personal greeting. For he had an intimate knowledge of the lives of his flock; even of such matters as their differences with the foremen or the management.

"Good evening, Donad. Have you put up a good fight?"

As the young man was impervious to moral temptations, his meaning was clear; had he mastered his dread of heights?

"Yes, I held out till the whistle blew."

"God will reward you, my boy. To fight down a weakness is as salutary for the soul as for the body."

The lighting was poor and the dark, timbered walls made the room gloomier still. Gymnastic apparatus occupied one end, for use on Sundays and summer evenings. The weather had turned cold, and the first-comers had annexed the seats nearest the big stove in the middle of the room.

Looking round, Donad noticed Edmond having a whispered conversation with the minister, but suspected nothing.

“What’s the programme this evening?” he asked the man beside him.

“Haven’t an idea.”

Some evenings the minister gave a short address on a Bible theme; on others he sat down at the harmonium and they learned new hymns and part-songs; or, again, if the attendance was small, they merely conversed amongst themselves on edifying subjects—which somehow always linked up with the progress of the dam.

Edmond came up and, without saying anything, took the place next Donad’s, just as the minister was ringing a small bell and seating himself behind the reading-desk on which the Bible lay. To his horror, Donad noticed that the minister had the French newspaper in his hand. He flushed, gave Edmond a reproachful look, and stirred uneasily in his chair, in half a mind to leave.

“Dear friends . . .”

The wind was still rising; now and again a gust would bring the sound of a concertina—which everyone tried not to hear.

“Dear friends, I had intended to speak to you tonight of the sermon in the wilderness, but . . .”

He unfurled the newspaper, and abruptly, amazingly, the Donadieu family entered into the life of Big Hole City.

“. . . but I cannot pass over in silence the conduct of our dear brother Donad, one of our best workers in the Lord’s vineyard. I have just read in a newspaper from his country . . .”

One after the other, all present turned to stare at the young man, who was blushing like a girl. After reading out the notice in halting French and translating it, the minister expatiated on the sacrifice brother Donad wished to make—of a fortune of hundreds of thousands of dollars—so as to continue leading a simple, ascetic life and keep himself unspotted from the world.

Then he opened his Bible at the passage telling how Esau bartered his birthright for a dish of red pottage. And now, for the first time, Donad, who had been too flustered to follow the preacher's words, began to pay serious attention.

"When Evil triumphs in high places as it does today, have we the right to set our personal peace of mind above the task that God may have allotted us? Have we the right, I say, in times of world-wide turmoil, when the devil is putting forth his utmost efforts, to stand out of the fight with folded arms?"

Donad, who was watching Edmond from the corner of an eye, felt certain there was an understanding between him and the preacher. And suddenly a mood of deep depression settled on him. The tenor of his life was threatened; with all his heart he rebelled against the thought of being torn away from Big Hole City, from these gatherings at the meeting-house, from those silent meals at Mrs Goudie's, where he watched with anxious eyes the sharing of the pudding. He had almost ceased to hear what was being said, but he could see the preacher's face glimmering moon-like under the feeble lamp, while his flock remained in heavy shadow, like figures in a Rembrandt print.

There were moments when he could hardly credit it was he who was being preached at; others when he envied the men beside him, who hadn't had the misfortune of being mentioned in the papers and being involved in situations that could only be cleared up in the light of biblical precedent.

"Our brother must take humble thought as to his duty, and, if he goes to France, our prayers will follow him. They will have power, I do not doubt, to bring him back to us, rich with new capacities for good, and better armed to fight the good fight against the powers of evil, which have never been more active than today."

When everyone rose, Donad felt ill at ease, as though already⁴ were less at one with his fellow-workers.

"It's Sunday tomorrow." The minister had come up and was handing the French paper back to him. "We shall all pray for you to be guided aright in this crisis of your life."

In the street Donad said nothing to Edmond, who walked beside

him, hanging his head. When they were passing the tavern, where dancing had now begun, Donad looked away.

He had already forgotten it was Saturday. He would have been greatly surprised to learn that Frédéric and his mother had spent a full hour talking about him, in an old-fashioned Paris flat. In a dim way he realized the strangeness of the fact that a man like the Rev. Cornelius Hopkins, Australian by birth but now an American citizen, should, at several thousand miles' distance, be showing so much interest in the Donadieu family affairs.

The Sunday that the workers on the great dam joined in prayer for the guidance of young Donad was the same Sunday as that on which, at Chenevières, once luncheon was over, everyone fell to wondering how to kill time until they started back to Paris.

When Donad went to sleep, his lips were pouting like a sulky child's and his fists clenched with passionate resolve not to give up his work on the dam, whatever pressure might be brought to bear on him. He had much the same feeling towards his work as a recluse has for his monastery, or another type of man for the army—for an organization in which one can escape oneself, merging one's personality in the communal life.

“Shall we play bridge?”

Unfortunately Pomeret had never learned to play that game, or, indeed, any other. Nor did he see any necessity for settling down to a game, and he was faintly puzzled by his hosts' evident desire for such diversion.

He had been shown round the château, and had duly appreciated the old-world atmosphere of the rooms, with their dark wainscoting, enormously thick walls, and windows opening on the forest, lashed now by wind and rain.

The smell of burning pine-logs tickled his nostrils agreeably, the sight of the flames dancing in the huge fireplace pleased his eye. He would have been quite content to sit for hours in his comfortable armchair, nursing a balloon-glass of old brandy between his palms and smoking a Havana, putting in an occasional leisurely remark on any subject that might crop up.

He was not in the least put out at having missed all his birds and hares at the shoot, and, at luncheon, had given humorous descriptions of similar misadventures at other shooting-parties.

"I don't suppose you will believe me when I say I do it almost—mind you, only *almost*—on purpose. But really . . ."

Now that they no longer had the stimulus of sitting round a table, everyone was thrown back on himself, and there was something lugubrious about the silences that fell, more and more frequently, on their conversation.

Martine, who was again lying on the sofa, kept looking at Philippe and Albert turn by turn, as if she were weighing up the two men against each other. And, indeed, the contrast was striking, between Albert with his mild appearance, lamblike manners, and Philippe, who had something of the jungle beast, its lithe grace and its ruthlessness—Philippe, who had laid the foundations of his success by making love to a drab like Charlotte in a decrepit summer-house.

His eyes were fixed on the leaping flames, and it was impossible to guess his thoughts. Albert seemed restless; after a longish silence he said to his wife:

"Would you get the bicarbonate, dear? I'm having trouble with my digestion."

She hurried out of the room. There was a shrill sound of voices in the kitchen, as if an altercation were in progress.

Philippe stretched himself, and turned towards Martine.

"What shall we do? I'm afraid it's too wet for a walk in the forest."

"Need we really do anything?" Pomeret smiled.

"The best thing," Martine remarked, "would be to get back to Paris while there's some daylight left. There's nothing to prevent our all having dinner together at a restaurant. I know it's not very nice on a Sunday; still, it's better than nothing."

They took a quarter of an hour to decide. Then there was a general move to the hall for hats and overcoats. At one moment, when Martine and Paulette happened to be side by side, Paulette asked:

"How shall we sort ourselves out in the cars?"

"Sort ourselves out?" Martine sounded surprised. Surely it was obvious they would go back as they had come; that is to say, with Pomeret in the saloon and the Grindorges in their car, which was smaller.

"Oh, it doesn't really matter. Only, I was thinking . . ."

What was she thinking? Her nerves were in such a state that she could hardly button her coat.

"Where shall we meet?"

Philippe decided for them.

"At my place."

"Look here," Pomeret put in, "I won't inflict my company on you any longer. If you'll drop me at the Porte d'Orléans, I'll take a taxi to my office."

"No, no. You really must stay with us. We should be *so* disappointed."

Actually he had not the slightest wish to stay with them, but, out of politeness, dared not insist.

Paulette continued behaving in a strange manner. Now she appealed to Philippe.

"I say, couldn't we all go back in your car?"

Philippe looked puzzled, while Albert protested energetically:

"Don't be absurd, Paulette! I'd have to come back again to fetch my car, or do without it all the week."

"Oh, for all the use you make of it . . ."

Martine was watching her and, though she had no inkling of what was to come, noting every detail. Paulette's remark, for instance, when the two cars were about to start:

"You go in front. You go quicker than we do. And we'll all meet at your place presently."

In the leading car the conversation turned naturally enough on the Grindorges and, to keep Paulette out of it as much as possible, Philippe enlarged on Albert's passion for statistics. The subject was harmless enough, and from statistics the talk veered to economics, and even to the activities of the *R.M.C.*

Rain was coming down in torrents when they drove through Pithiviers, and then Arpajon. As they were approaching Longjumeau a tyre went flat—the first time it had happened with this

car. The passengers stayed inside while the chauffeur extracted the tool-box from the back and set out his tools on the roadside under the rain.

There was a spare wheel, and it should not have taken more than ten minutes to get the car going again. Actually they were held up for half an hour, as the jack was out of order and Félix had to go and borrow another from a café five hundred yards away, on the outskirts of the town.

Suddenly Martine observed :

“That’s curious ! The Grindorges haven’t caught us up yet.”

No one had thought of this until now. What made it all the more surprising was that they had not been driving at all fast during the first part of the run.

“I wonder what can have happened ?” Pomeret remarked.

Philippe thought best to take it lightly.

“Oh, I expect they found they’d forgotten something and had to go back for it.”

“Or,” the Minister suggested, “they, too, may have had a puncture.”

His eyes were on Philippe as he spoke, and he noticed that the dark rings round Philippe’s eyes seemed more accentuated than usual. Though he had no definite idea of the relations between the two young couples, he had a vague suspicion of something amiss. This was one of the reasons why, when they were entering Paris, he insisted on getting out and taking a taxi home, on the pretext that he had just remembered an official function which he was due to attend that evening.

When he had gone, Philippe moved to the place beside his wife ; he disliked travelling with his back to the direction in which the car was travelling. Then he stretched his legs, sighed, and ran his hand over his forehead.

“What a day !”

“Still, you had her near you,” Martine smiled.

He frowned and muttered irritably :

“Don’t talk nonsense !”

He was aggrieved. She should have had more sense than to increase the strain on his nerves by displays of petty jealousy at

such a moment. Yes, she too was a fool, with a one-way mind, for all her seeming intelligence!

She should have realized that love had nothing to do with it; that the one thing on his mind just now was how to stop Paulette from doing something foolish. But Martine, after the manner of jealous women, kept brooding on his physical relations with her "rival," those dreary, futile séances in an hotel bedroom hired by the afternoon.

One thing in particular had quickened his anxiety this evening, the odd way in which Paulette had shaken hands with him through the window of the car. She had dug her nails into his flesh so deeply that his thumb was bleeding and he had to keep his hand-kerchief rolled round it.

What on earth could they be up to in the car behind? And why had Paulette proposed that they should leave it at Chenevières, or arrange themselves differently for the journey back? He cast a sour glance at Martine. Really it was her fault; for the last week she had made it impossible for him to have a quiet talk with Paulette. It was not for lack of trying that he had failed. But she had kept track of his movements, telephoning repeatedly to the office, and even to Paulette, so as to make sure where each of them was at any given moment.

At last the car stopped; they had come home. Martine went straight to the nursery, and found it empty. Her heart missed a beat. Then she saw a note lying on the table.

"Madame,—Your mother rang up to ask me to bring Master Claude to her flat for the afternoon, as you were out, and I did not like to say No. I hope I did the right thing. I will take great care of him. . . ."

"What is it?" asked Philippe, who had followed her.

"Claude is at mamma's place, with Nurse."

"You know I don't like his going there."

He had no particular reason for this except, perhaps, that he wished to keep his son under home influences as long as possible.

"Telephone to Nurse, please, to bring him back."

Rather to his surprise, she did so at once. Receiver in hand, she turned to Philippe.

"Mamma wants to know if she can bring him back herself." He hesitated; then it struck him that this would mean another person in the house if . . . if anything happened.

"Certainly. Tell her to come."

"Yes, mamma, it's quite all right. And you must stay to dinner with us."

It was six o'clock, and the servants were coming back from their afternoon off. Philippe went to his room to change, and lingered for some time in front of his glass, gazing hard into his own eyes. Even now there was a trace of play-acting in his pose, and he was inwardly congratulating himself on his imperturbability.

"The luck's dead against me for the moment," he murmured, quickly adding: "But I'm keeping my head. And I'll keep it, whatever happens."

Otherwise—heaven alone knew what might ensue! "If only you were free . . .!" Yes, when he said that he had meant it; half meant it, anyhow. Only there were . . . reservations. Were Paulette to become free now, it would serve no purpose; old Grindorge was still alive. In a year or so, when Albert had inherited his father's fortune—yes, *then* it would be different.

But what an imbecile the woman was! She actually believed he loved her for herself, enjoyed her inexpert caresses, her maudlin sentimentality! And, infatuated as she was, she was quite capable of pushing her folly to any extremity.

He took a bottle of iodine from a shelf, and was dabbing it on the wound her nail had made on his thumb, when the bell rang.

It was not the Grindorges, but his son who had returned, escorted by Mme Donadieu and the nurse. Claude promptly went up to his father, like a well-mannered child, and held forward his forehead for a kiss; his cheeks were cool and moist from the fresh air.

Mme Donadieu kissed her daughter with more than her usual warmth, then gave her a long look.

"I'm so pleased . . ."

Pleased to see her again and, still more, to find her so composed in appearance.

"I've been rather out of sorts these last few days," Martine said, to excuse herself.

"Well, you seem all right now. That's the great thing. But you know what I'm like. I've only got you two . . ."

"Didn't Michel go to see you?"

"Yes, and he told me your husband had been quite nice to him. But, you know . . ."

Again she left her phrase unfinished. Michel was her son, of course—just as Marthe, whom she went to see twice a year at La Rochelle, was her daughter. Only somehow when they were together they never found anything to say to each other; in fact, the atmosphere at their rare meetings was much like that which had prevailed this very afternoon at Chenevières.

"Anyhow, he's the only one in the family who's like that," added Mme Donadieu as she took off her hat.

She did not go into details; that would have been both painful and superfluous. They all kept to the vaguest terms when talking about Michel, but everyone knew what was meant: that he was gradually sinking deeper into a morass of corruption, and the end was bound to be disastrous.

"Perhaps his wife's behaviour affected him more than we suspected at the time."

A lame excuse. He had begun before that; first with a nurse-maid, then with Odette.

Philippe, his forehead pressed to the window-pane, was watching for the Grindorges' car. The trees along the Avenue were dripping; at the corner, where the Bois began, a policeman stood on duty, shivering under his blue cape.

"Some tea, mamma?"

"No, thanks. We had tea at my place. But I'd love a glass of port."

Martine rang for the butler and gave the order. Then she went and stood at Philippe's side. Evidently both had the same thought in mind, for she asked:

"No sign of them yet?"

"Are you expecting people to dinner?" asked Mme Donadieu from her armchair.

"Only the Grindorges. But perhaps they won't come."

Philippe gave a start and looked hard at his wife; then was

furious with himself for yielding to this nervous reflex, which he felt sure she had noticed. But then she added, by way of explanation :

“It’s such dreadful weather, isn’t it? And Albert was complaining of pains inside.”

Philippe could bear it no longer, and walked out of the room. Martine called after him :

“Won’t you have some port?”

“I’ll be back in a minute,” he said, from the hall.

He shut himself up in his bedroom, and found himself standing again in front of the glass. After a keen glance at his face he went to the telephone on his bedside table and called up the Grindorges’ flat.

“Hullo?” He kept his voice low, his gaze shifting from his reflected self to the door, and back again.

“Yes? Who’s that? Oh, it’s you, Florence. Monsieur Dargens speaking. Are Monsieur and Madame Grindorge back?”

“Oh? Were they to come back this afternoon?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because the cook’s not got any dinner ready.”

“Well, as I said, I don’t know what their plans were. I rang up on the off-chance.”

Even if they’d been doing only twenty miles an hour, they should have been back by now. And, had the car broken down, Grindorge would surely have telephoned, since, for all he knew, Pomeret might be waiting dinner for them at a restaurant.

Philippe sat down on the edge of his bed, letting the receiver fall back with a weary gesture. He had a sense of imminent peril, as never in his life before; for the last half-hour big drops of sweat had been oozing from his forehead.

There were footsteps in the hall. Someone tried to open his door, but it was locked.

“Are you there, Philippe?”

And suddenly he saw red. Turning the key, he flung the door open; his wife was standing on the threshold.

“Yes, I’m here. What the hell do you want *now*?”

He knew that he was behaving absurdly; that what had prompted

her to come wasn't curiosity, but her woman's instinct, a desire, perhaps, to help him in his trouble. But it was too late; he had let his nerves take charge and, before he could stop it, a vulgar phrase broke from his lips :

"So I can't be left in peace—even when I go to the w.c.!"

It was noon at Big Hole City and Donad was taking his place at Mrs Goudie's table, embarrassed by the knowledge that the eyes of all the boarders, who now regarded him as the most eccentric of millionaires, were fixed on him. His embarrassment reached its climax when the good lady served him first, and gave him an enormous helping—without the least sign of protest from the others.

VII

COULD it have been that, but for the old gentleman whom they could hear fussing and fuming in the lobby below, things would have turned out differently?

Mme Donadieu had dined with her daughter and son-in-law, and it was Philippe as much as Martine who had pressed her into staying late. As a special treat, Claude had been allowed to have his dinner with the grown-ups.

Then, out of the blue, as she was seeing her mother to the lift, Martine had given way. Her eyes were blurred with tears as she said, "*Au revoir, mamma*," in a choking voice, and, instead of bestowing the usual kiss on Mme Donadieu's forehead, she flung herself into her mother's arms, pressing herself to the old lady's ample breast.

"What's the matter, darling? Tell your old mother all about it."

But Martine pointed to the open door of the lift and, instead of speaking, gulped down a sob. For they had already pressed the button and the lift was waiting at their floor.

"Is it about Philippe?" Mme Donadieu's voice was almost drowned by the shrilling of the bell; the old gentleman on the ground floor was summoning the lift.

"Martine—don't frighten me! Tell me what it is."

Again there was a loud peal of the bell.

"No, don't worry. It's nothing." With an effort Martine got the words out.

Then she almost pushed her mother into the waiting lift, and stood watching her go down, dwindling to a head and shoulders, then a head only, then a hat; while, looking up, Mme Donadieu saw her daughter's form receding in the opposite order, till finally nothing was visible but the hem of a skirt.

Martine lingered for some moments, to steady herself, and she saw the impatient old gentleman carried up in the lift to the flat above, and even noticed that he had a brown wart on his nose.

On returning to the flat she went first to her room, to settle her hair and dab some powder on her cheeks. Philippe had stayed in the drawing-room. Presently she joined him there and for some moments hovered round him uncertainly, pretending to be looking for something. Suddenly she stopped in front of him.

"Philippe!"

He was holding a magazine, but she could see he was not reading, and guessed he was as agitated as she, if not more.

"Philippe! Are you listening?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"The Grindorges aren't back yet." She watched his face, which now was relatively calm.

"How do you know?"

"I've just rung up."

"Why did you do that?"

"Oh, for no special reason. The maid answered.—Philippe!"

"Yes? What do you want *now*?"

"Keep looking at me, please."

She had mastered her emotion, and her voice was steady, her gaze calm and searching. He was seated, and Martine, who was standing, seemed to dominate the situation not only by her height but by the firmness of her attitude and tone.

"Listen to me, Philippe. And please don't try to put me off with lies. What I'm asking now I ask for the sake of all that's dearest to us—our love, our little boy. Have you nothing to tell me, Philippe?"

There was a dark compulsion in her eyes, which never shifted from her husband's, as if determined to wrest the truth from him. And her voice had a deep fervour he had never heard in it before.

"There's still time," she continued. "I won't try to work on your feelings; I won't remind you of those nights in my bedroom at La Rochelle, or our first weeks in Paris. But I beg you, Philippe —Look! I'm going on my knees to you!—I beseech you to answer. . . . Have you nothing to tell me?"

She had sunk on to her knees, and was clasping her hands towards him, incapable of saying another word.

Philippe tried to look away, but her eyes held him, and he realized that, so long as he stayed in the chair, there was no escape. With an effort he rose, swung round, turning his back on his wife, and began to move towards the door, muttering uncomfortably:

"What should I have to tell you? Really, you must be going crazy!"

Martine was still on her knees when he walked out. Not till he was entering his bedroom did he hear her getting up, and he supposed she was going to run after him, make a last desperate appeal. Quickly he turned the key.

She heard the sound, stopped a few yards from his door, then slowly went to her own room.

Philippe undressed with his usual neat precision, though hardly conscious what he was doing. Then he measured out sixty drops of a sleeping-draught into a tumbler. Sitting up in bed, he unfurled a newspaper and waited for the drug to take effect. He was no more aware of the printed words before him than he had been in the drawing-room. But his brain was active, and his mind-pictures had a strange lucidity, like that of the lighting-effects one sometimes sees in theatres, which, though not violent, are sharply focused, and bring out unexpected details. As though disembodied, he observed himself lying in bed, in a luxurious room the air of which was faintly redolent of leather, with the pale glow from a bedside lamp playing on the pillow. He saw his face, a glimmering oval under a mass of brown hair, strong and smooth, brushed back from his temples. And all the time a voice, his own, was echoing in his ears. "I won't! I won't give in!"

He was only thirty, and felt convinced that great achievement lay within his reach. Only thirty. With half a life before him. And abruptly, on this thought, he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Martine stayed awake till four or five in the morning; twice in the course of the night she walked bare-footed to her husband's door.

It was broad daylight when she woke, with a start. The wind had risen and a shutter was flapping at a window of the flat above. For some moments she sat up in bed, haunted by a dim, unformulated fear, before her mind began to march again. Then she rang for her maid.

"Good morning, Rose. What's the time? Has Monsieur Dargens gone out?"

"Yes, Madame. He left at the usual time. It's after nine."

After a summary toilet she hurried to Philippe's room. A dressing-gown sprawled on the bed, boxing-gloves lay on a stool, the water in the bath was still tepid, and blue with soap. So Philippe had had his usual boxing-lesson with Pedretti! In a way this reassured her, but at the back of her mind was a feeling that there had been something almost indecorous about this sparring-match. . . .

"Tell him my husband's always in his office from eight onwards."

"The gentleman insists on seeing you, Madame."

The butler handed her a card on a tray, and it seemed to her that there was something unusual in his attitude. But perhaps that was only a trick of her nerves.

There was no help for it; try as she might to persuade herself that this morning was like any other, even the light in the flat seemed different, and the butler waiting, tray in hand, looked like a figure of impending judgment. She glanced at the card.

"*André Lucas. Divisional Superintendent, Police Judiciaire.*"

"Where is he?"

"In the hall, Madame."

"Show him into the drawing-room."

She was clad only in a dressing-gown, but that was no matter. Just then it struck her that she had not yet given her son his usual

“good-morning” kiss, and on her way she visited the nursery, where Claude was having his bath.

On entering the drawing-room she—quite unconsciously—had assumed her most stately manner, and the Superintendent was all excuses.

“I am exceedingly sorry to trouble you, Madame. I asked to see Monsieur Dargens, but was told that he had left already.”

“My husband always attends office at eight.”

“Yes, so your butler told me. I’ll go and see him presently. But, before that, might I ask you one or two questions?”

“Won’t you sit down?”

She, too, sat down, and the long dressing-gown in pale, slightly iridescent silk made her look slimmer and taller than usual.

“I understand that you were at a shooting-party yesterday in the neighbourhood of Orléans.”

Martine could take no credit for it; she was not so much composed as stunned. The words came at her like so many missiles which she strained to catch, even to intercept before they reached her ears. But the Superintendent misread her calmness, and observed:

“I see you don’t know what has happened. You haven’t read this morning’s paper?”

The newspapers were lying near her, on a silver tray.

“Monsieur Albert Grindorge died yesterday afternoon, at a hospital in Arpajon.”

Had she foreknown this? Nothing of it took her by surprise, and she waited quietly to hear what the man would say next. She could have sworn she knew that too. . . .

“He died under very tragic circumstances. Death was due to poisoning. The local police gave us a full report this morning, and . . .”

“Would you excuse me for a moment?” Martine stood up quickly.

“Certainly.”

Like a sleep-walker she moved into her bedroom, took the first coat she saw—her mink coat, as it happened—and slipped it over the dressing-gown.

Then she hastened to the door, ran down the stairs, and hailed a passing taxi, giving the address of Philippe's office.

It had happened just outside the market-hall at Arpajon. For some minutes Albert had been fidgeting and, after looking round vainly for a *café*, had stopped the car outside a rather unprepossessing little tavern.

"I must get out for a moment," he said to his wife. "Shall I bring a drink to warm you up?"

She shook her head, and he hurried into the taproom.

"The lavatory?" he asked, before even ordering a drink.

"At the end of the yard, on your right. Just after the fowl-run. It's a bit dark, I'm afraid."

Here it was neither town nor country. What the landlord called a yard was more of a kitchen-garden, with a few forlorn cabbage-stumps surviving between piles of empty bottles, casks and crates, and some fowls that took to flight as Albert groped his way along the muddy path.

The landlord's wife, who had been listening, remarked:

"He's found it."

Leaning against the zinc-sheathed counter, her husband resumed his conversation with a cartman.

"I told him straight. It ain't fair that just because we're in the trade we got to pay through the nose all the time, when other folks get off scot-free. 'I voted for you last elections,' I says, 'but this time . . .'"

There were three *café* tables, some chairs, a small billiard-table in a corner.

"Listen, Eugène!"

"Eh?"

"Sounds like someone groaning, don't it?"

All three listened. The landlord frowned.

"That's queer."

"Perhaps he's been taken ill."

It was a rare event for owners of private cars to halt at the little tavern.

"Hadn't you better go and see?"

"Oh, let's wait a bit. Perhaps it's nothing." He was about to resume his conversation when his wife tapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't you hear? He's calling for help."

Actually the sound that came from the yard was more like the baying of a foghorn than a human cry.

"Well? Why don't you go?"

"Look here," said the landlord to the cartman, "*you* come, too. It'd be better-like if there was two of us."

"Here, take the flash." His wife handed him a small electric torch.

The battery was almost completely run down. In the yard the groaning could be heard distinctly. There was no doubt the man was in great pain. Just beyond the fowl-run, as the landlord's wife had said, was a small, tumble-down shed with a roughly made seat and squares of newspaper on a rusty hook beside it.

Grindorge was lying on the floor, writhing convulsively.

"What's wrong? Got the belly-ache?"

The woman, who had lingered in the background, suggested carrying him into the house.

"Mind where you put him," she added. "He's all filthy after rolling in that muck."

It was the cartman who raised Albert by the shoulders and dragged him into the house, through the kitchen.

"Where shall I put him?"

"In the taproom. There's a bench there."

But Grindorge rolled off the bench at once, so they hoisted him on to the billiard-table, after spreading newspapers on it. Paulette, whom the woman had gone out to call, came in. She looked scared out of her wits.

"Feeling ill, Albert? Shall I send for a doctor?"

As the landlord's wife was to inform the police next day, Paulette gave the impression of being "not quite all there."

She turned and asked shakily:

"Is there a doctor near here?"

The woman ran out to fetch one, while the landlord, aided by the cartman, tried to force some raw, fiery brandy between Grindorge's tight-set lips.

"Let me have some too," said Paulette, who had seated herself on a rush-bottomed chair, and gave a start each time her husband groaned.

The brandy was so strong that she coughed most of it up. There was a sound of hurried steps and the woman came back, followed by a young doctor who hovered round his patient for some moments with an embarrassed air. At last he made up his mind.

"He must go to hospital at once. . . . How did it start?"

"I don't know. He was driving. He seemed all right. Then he stopped the car."

"The moment he came in," added the landlord, "he asked the way to the w.c."

Grindorge died in hospital at about the same time as Mme Donadieu, accompanied by her grandson, entered her daughter's flat.

Paulette had been told to stay in the hospital waiting-room; it had white enamelled walls, some wooden benches, and an electric fire. Every five minutes a nurse came to give her the latest news or to ask a question.

"Can you say what he ate today?"

Paulette answered promptly, giving every detail she could remember.

". . . and, after the cheese, he had a pear, one of the winter pears from our orchard."

The car had stayed beside the market-hall. A police officer, on information from the owner of the tavern, came to the hospital and, after a brief conversation with the doctor in charge, rang up headquarters.

In the bare, harshly lit waiting-room, where nothing cast a shadow except herself, Paulette remained seated, her hands clasped on her knees, staring into vacancy.

"I am afraid, Madame, that a *post-mortem* examination will be necessary. I don't know what arrangements you propose to make. Are there any relatives to notify?"

"Yes, there's his father." Somehow she got the words out, adding old Grindorge's address and telephone number.

"As for yourself, we can fix up for you to stay here for the night. You look as if you needed rest."

Yes, she needed rest, and had not the least wish to go back to the flat. The doctor, who was watching her covertly, exchanged a glance with the nurse, as if to say: "Queer bird, isn't she?"

When news of Albert's death was brought to her, she refused to go to see him. She was given a small bedroom with a hospital bed, and, an hour later, when a nurse came to ask if she wanted anything, was sleeping soundly.

The taximan, who could see her in his driving mirror, was puzzled by the appearance of his fare. For one thing, he noticed that under the fur coat she was wearing a silk dressing-gown. And, all the time, she was straining forward, as if by so doing she hoped to make the car go faster.

Martine had only one idea—to get there in time. Without troubling to pay the driver she ran to the lift, and asked the lift-boy as he opened the door:

"Has my husband gone out?"

"I don't think so. I haven't seen him, anyhow."

As, still running, she crossed the big vestibule, the clerks stared at her across the counter. When passing the door with Albert's name on it she had a shock, and for the first time fully realized that he was dead; they would never see him again.

"Philippe!" she cried.

Thank heaven, he was still there! She gazed hard at him, then laid her hand on his shoulder. "You must come at once. There's a police-officer at the flat."

He took it so calmly that she felt herself growing calmer.

"Well, what if there is? Really, Martine, you shouldn't get into such a state over—"

"You don't know, then?"

"That Albert's dead? I know. What about it?"

She stared at him in wonder. Surely he couldn't be so unconcerned as that! Almost angrily she repeated:

"Come!"

"If the police have anything to ask me, it's for them to come here. I'm not going to run after them."

But when she said "Come!" once more, her tone was so compelling that he rang for Caron.

"I must go out. I'll be back in an hour."

"I regret having made you wait, Superintendent, but I wished my husband to be present."

She was so cold that she kept her fur coat on, while Philippe sat down facing the police-officer, crossed his legs, and lit a cigarette.

"You'd better leave us, Martine. Your nerves are none too good just now." And then he told a lie; a deliberate, disgusting lie. Turning to the Superintendent, he said quite coolly: "You must excuse my wife; she is in an interesting condition, and I can see the news you brought has upset her seriously."

"It's I," the police-officer replied politely, "who should apologize for disturbing you like this. . . . There are complications in this case, as it so happens; the parties concerned all live in Paris, but the death took place at Arpajon, and the crime, if there was a crime, must have been committed in the Orléans district. So far, I have read only the report of the local police. As you and Madame Dargens spent the day yesterday with the Grindorges . . ."

"Monsieur Pomeret, the Minister of Education, was there too."

"I know. I've an appointment with him at eleven." The Superintendent glanced at his watch. "The five of you left Paris together, I believe. Would you give me an account of all that happened in the course of the day?"

Philippe did so, at considerable length, smoking one cigarette after another. Martine, who, despite her husband's advice, had stayed in the room, did not see him betray the least uneasiness at any moment, even when the Superintendent asked:

"You were very friendly with the Grindorges, I gather. Can you tell me if you ever noticed anything in their attitude towards each other which . . .?"

"I know nothing of their private lives."

"You never saw any signs that they . . . they didn't hit it off?"

"Certainly not. That's so, isn't it, Martine?"

She nodded.

"I must apologize for my next question. Monsieur Grindorge senior, whom I visited this morning before coming here, alleges that ever since his son and daughter-in-law became intimate with you he has noticed a great change in his son's behaviour."

"I quite agree. The Grindorges started going out much more, leading a gayer life, if I may say so."

"Thank you. . . . I presume that you have no intention of leaving Paris during the next few days?"

"No, I have no such intention," Philippe replied in a toneless voice.

"Because, if you have occasion to leave, I must ask you to ring up the Police Judiciaire and warn them."

He started looking for his hat, of which the butler had relieved him when he came in. Murmuring excuses, he bowed to Martine, and presently could be heard going down in the lift.

And then it seemed as if the big flat had suddenly become still bigger, but completely empty; a hollow shell containing merely two people, Martine and Philippe—Martine shivering slightly in her fur coat, and Philippe who, after shaking off the ash of his cigarette with a fretful gesture, stubbed it out against the edge of an ashtray.

Once the lift-door had clanged below and the servant left the room, there were some moments of dead silence. Slowly Philippe raised his head and looked at Martine. And now it came to him that the time for lies was ended; he understood why she had gone to his office to summon him, and forced him to return with her to the flat.

He was struck by the change in her appearance; her features had grown hard—whether with despair or with implacable resolve he could not tell. But all she said was:

"Well? What do you propose to do?"

There was something so scornful and so imperious in her tone that Philippe quailed, and fell to pacing restlessly up and down the room. When he wanted to light another cigarette, his fingers

were trembling so violently that he could not make the lighter work.

"You heard my question, Philippe?"

"I don't know what you mean," he muttered, looking away.

"Philippe!"

"Yes?"

"Look at me. Don't be a coward as well. I asked: What do you propose to do?"

"And I ask you—what's the point of an idiotic remark like that?"

Then an amazing thing took place. She walked straight up to him, an impressive figure in the long, heavy fur coat, and, when he started to turn his head again, she slapped his face. The gesture was impulsive, and no sooner had she made it than she cried, in an anguished tone:

"Philippe!"

He very nearly returned the blow. For a moment it looked as if both would lose their self-control completely and there would be a vulgar brawl. After a moment, however, he steadied himself and began to walk towards the door. *

Martine followed; more, she moved in front and barred the way.

"No, you shan't go. Don't you understand—even now?"

"I understand that you're going off your head."

"Don't be disgusting! If anyone's gone off her head, you know quite well it isn't I, but that poor woman. . . . Now I'll repeat my question, for the last time. What do you propose to do?"

"But there's not a scrap of evidence that Paulette . . ."

"Do you mean to say you didn't notice the way that policeman looked at you when he repeated what Albert's father had told him?"

"I haven't committed any crime. They can't do anything to me."

"That's not the point. The policeman's not here now. . . . I want to know your plans."

There was a cocktail-cabinet in a corner of the room, and he began to pour himself out a drink. Martine snatched the glass from him and flung it on the floor.

"Are you really such a coward?"

"Not so loud! The servants . . ."

"What do they matter—considering the point that things have come to? Own up, Philippe. You were thinking of going away, weren't you?"

There, she was mistaken. The idea had crossed his mind in the course of the previous night, but, on thinking it over in his office in the morning, he had convinced himself that no charge could possibly be laid against him. It was no criminal offence to have a married woman as his mistress, or even to express a wish that she were free.

"And, let me tell you," Martine went on, "I'll never, never agree to that."

He gave a short laugh.

"Very flattering! I suppose this is what they call 'love'!"

"I don't know if it's love or if it's hatred"—here her voice lost its firmness for a moment—"but I do know that you and I have built up a life together. I know, too, that you're quite capable of starting another, somewhere else. And that's something I absolutely refuse to let you do."

"Do, please, talk more quietly."

"I don't care who hears me."

"Our son . . ."

"Your son, Philippe; that's what you've always called him. . . . Now, at last, you must tell me frankly what you're going to do."

Neither of them could know that at this same moment Paulette Grindorge was seated in a small office on the Quai des Orfèvres, confronting a Superintendent who for two hours had been harking back, like Martine, to the same question.

"Why did you poison your husband?"

And always the same answer.

"I didn't poison him."

A policeman who had been sent to Chenevières on his motor-cycle to question Naomi had just come back with a statement, part of which the Superintendent read out to Paulette.

"During that Sunday morning did your mistress appear to be in her usual state of mind?"

“‘No.’

“‘What did you notice about her that seemed abnormal?’

“‘Everything! Really, it was like a madhouse all the morning. Madame kept roaming about like a lost soul, and popping into the kitchen every few minutes. Sometimes she went out into the yard, in all that teeming rain, and came back looking like death warmed up, as they say. . . .’

“‘Did you hear her quarrelling with her husband that morning?’

“‘She didn’t have a chance. He was out shooting in the forest with the other gentlemen.’

“‘Do you know if she had a lover?’

“‘That’s no business of mine, and I ain’t saying anything.’

“‘You are bound by law to tell me all you know. This is a police enquiry. In any case, you’ll be examined again, on oath. Answer my question.’

“‘I can’t answer it. I don’t know.’

“‘Well, have you noticed anything in Madame Grindorge’s behaviour that . . .?’

“‘I once saw her slip a note into Monsieur Philippe’s hand.’

“‘Was that all?’

“‘Another day I caught them kissing on the landing.’

“‘What rooms did Madame Grindorge enter in the course of Sunday morning?’

“‘That I can’t say. But I couldn’t help wondering what she was up to in the wash-house.’”

The police-officer had added a note:

“I have made an inventory of the objects in this wash-house, which is now used as a store-room. Among other articles I found a bottle of Molebane. The cork was moist, though the liquid reached only half-way up the bottle. I took possession of it and hand it in with this report.”

The Seine was in flood, and from the windows of the office on the Quai one saw a turbid mass of dark-brown water plunging under the arches of a bridge. The Superintendent asked:

“Do you recognize this bottle of Molebane? I must warn you, before you reply, that finger-prints have been detected on it.”

The question had a result that took the police-officer by surprise. Paulette jerked her head up with a grimace that had a faint resemblance to a smile, and calmly said :

“You can kill me if you like. I don’t mind dying.” There was a radiance in her eyes as if, beyond the grey walls of the office, she glimpsed celestial visions.

Martine had kept her eyes fixed on her husband’s face, and now she sighed :

“My poor Philippe!”

Poor indeed, this man in whom she had once believed, and who was again slinking into his bedroom. Taking some quick steps forward, she joined him on the threshold, entered, and turned the key on the inside.

“Don’t you realize that after all the things you’ve done I couldn’t dream of letting you go? Remember Charlotte. Remember all the Donadieus whom you . . . No, I won’t reproach you; I’m quite as much to blame myself. In fact, that’s why . . .”

“Look here!” he broke in roughly. “Will you tell me in plain language just what you’re getting at?”

But it sounded hollow. Really, his one idea was to escape. Had there been any way open, he would have taken it.

“It’s no use, Philippe. You’ve got to face what’s coming. Very soon, this evening or tomorrow, they’ll be here, questioning you, putting you through it. . . .”

“I haven’t done anything!”

“Perhaps not. But the fact remains—we’re at the end of our tether.”

“I’m only thirty,” he pointed out with a touch of defiance.

“And I’m only twenty-two, Philippe. Albert was thirty-five. Paulette has two small children and . . .”

“That’s enough. Anyhow, is it *my* fault?”

“Now try to be a man, and hear what I have to say. Claude will be all right. Mamma’ll look after him.”

His eyes widened.

“What’s that you’re saying?”

"I say that mamma will look after Claude. One must know when one's beaten. Look at me, Philippe, I beg you."

Never before had he seen that look in Martine's eyes, a look of infinite, devoted love. And it amazed him all the more now, when he half expected to see hatred in them.

"Philippe! It's time for us to go. . . ."

He misunderstood, and almost smiled. But then he saw that she was holding out to him the revolver she had taken from a drawer.

"I'll not recall . . . all you've done to me. Anyhow, that's over and done with. But I spent a good part of the night thinking about it. And I wasn't quite sure as yet—but I had a sort of hunch. . . . This morning, when I didn't find you in the flat, I really thought you'd gone for good."

Just then an idea crossed Philippe's mind—of seizing the revolver and flinging it through the window.

But Martine seemed to guess his thought; all the colour left her cheeks, and she cried beseechingly:

"No, Philippe. Please, *please* don't do that. Don't spoil"

He lunged forward, tried to grip her wrist and twist it. She fired two shots in quick succession; watched him swaying, swaying, his hand pressed to his chest. And then she bent towards him as he fell, her arms outstretched.

"Philippe! My Philippe!" Her voice broke on a sob.

Could he still see her? Could he see her eyes aglow with love above his open eyes as she crouched over him, and hear the last fond words she murmured, or feel a tear fall on his cheek? Pressing the revolver to her breast, she pulled the trigger.

"My Philippe!"

The servants were trying to break the door in. Martine's maid had run to the telephone and was frantically calling up the police.

Death was slow in coming to Martine as she lay stretched upon her husband's body. She reached out to the revolver, put its muzzle in her mouth and fired again.

"Phil . . . !"

VIII

DONAD had just time enough in Paris to buy a ready-made black suit. As might have been expected, it was too small; an inch of shirt-cuff protruded from each sleeve and an equal length of sock below each trouser-leg.

The people of La Rochelle found him changed out of recognition. He was pointed at in the street, and those who spoke to him were struck by his voice.

“Why, he’s picked up an American accent!”

That was so. During the last six years, even when with Edmond, he hadn’t spoken a word of French. And in this smallish town, with its inhabitants so diverse in temperament and outlook, he felt like a fish out of water, and his old shyness returned when he had occasion to talk to any of them.

Impressed by his height and robustness, they could hardly believe that he was Michel’s brother.

By the strict letter of ecclesiastical law one, anyhow, of the Dargens couple should have been refused the Catholic rites. But, after having enquiries made in Paris, the local clergy came to the conclusion that there was no knowing which of the two had committed suicide. The bishop ruled that, under these circumstances, it was more charitable to give both the benefit of the doubt and grant them Christian burial.

For the first time for many years the house in the Rue Réaumur was full from top to bottom. The big drawing-room had been converted into a mortuary chapel, the portraits of Oscar Donadieu and his wife shrouded in black crape.

Mme Donadieu stayed in the lodge at the end of the drive, where she had lived for some months before Philippe and Martine left for Paris.

Michel had the first floor to himself; the rooms had been left exactly as they were when he was living in them with Eva. His son had come from Grenoble, where he was at school—for the summer only, as he spent his winters at a higher altitude.

"Why not stay at our place?" Mme Donadieu had suggested to Frédéric.

But he preferred to put up at the *Hôtel de France*, from which, on the morning of the funeral, he had a ten minutes' talk with Odette over the 'phone, to reassure her. For, on the previous evening, old Baillet had started on one of his drinking-bouts and was in a dangerous mood. Hearing of this, Frédéric had gone to the Superintendent of Police and had a long talk with him.

"I suggest," he said finally, "that you should find some pretext for keeping him in the lock-up tomorrow, if only for three hours."

A pretext was duly found, if a rather lame one. It was that Baillet had been seen trespassing on military property, the parade-ground, when cutting grass for his rabbits. He had already had several drinks when the policeman came to arrest him, and put up a stout resistance.

And, once in the lock-up, he started bawling so loudly that his invectives of the Government, the police, and the Donadieus, could be heard half-way down the Rue du Palais.

All the notables of La Rochelle attended the funeral; amongst them Camboulives—whose two daughters had been married the previous week—the Varins, the Mortiers, Limaille the lawyer, and Maître Goussard. The crews of the Donadieu fishing-fleet, and all who could be spared from colliers and cargo-boats, the office staff and workmen, even the local agents for Donadieu Briquets, turned out in force, some of them carrying wreaths to buy which they had clubbed together.

Even the Krugers of Mulhausen took notice, though they had been out of touch with Mme Donadieu for many years, and sent her a forty-word telegram of condolence.

Six years had passed since the Donadieus were last seen together. The general verdict was that Mme Donadieu looked much brisker and fitter than in the past, whereas Michel had become a sorry, not to say repulsive, sight.

People were so much used to seeing the Olsens that they hardly looked at them. It was really Kiki who was the focus of interest.

"Are you sure it's he?"

All sorts of fantastic rumours were going round.

"Just fancy ! He's got himself naturalized as an American, so they say."

Others went farther and, probably because they had heard tales of the young man's mystical proclivities, asserted that he had "gone Mormon!"

"He has a job in a gold-mine over there. One wouldn't think it to look at him—did you ever see such clothes!—but he has more money than all the other Donadieus put together."

Edmond, fearing a cold reception, had stayed in Paris; Donad was to ring him up the moment the ceremony ended.

There had been fears of a disturbance at the funeral, not only because of old Baillet's threats—nowadays no one took him very seriously—but owing to the dockers' strike that had broken out three days previously, and regarding which Olsen was taking a firm line, as representative of the Donadieu interests.

Everyone had read in the morning paper the latest news of the "Dargens Tragedy."

"After a lengthy examination by two eminent mental specialists,

Mme Grindorge has been declared of unsound mind, and transferred to an asylum."

Hidden under a mass of flowers, both coffins were laid side by side on the same catafalque, in the central aisle. Of the women seated on the left, in the pale glow of candles and the bleak autumnal light falling from the high windows, it was Marthe who had shed the most tears. Mme Donadieu held herself very erect, gazing fixedly at the altar and the officiating priest.

On the right of the aisle Kiki stood with folded arms, and even at the Elevation omitted, out of forgetfulness perhaps, to kneel. He, like his mother, was gazing straight ahead; but, whereas her eyes were dark with grief and indignation, his had the serenity of one who has found his path in life. His heart and soul were overseas, in Big Hole City. This was a mere passing show, signifying nothing, and he had resolved to leave by the first train next day.

Olsen, who had been watching him with a puzzled look, whispered in his ear :

"Do you propose to stay some time in France ?"

And Michel, while to the burden of deep organ-notes boys' voices sang the *Dies Irae*, was hoping that Philippe had forgotten to enter in his accounts that fifteen thousand francs' advance made to him during the previous week. He had asked for twenty thousand, but Philippe always beat him down.

The service proceeded, the congregation kneeling, standing, or crossing themselves according to the rubric. Now and again the silvery chimes of a small bell sounded through the dim, incense-laden air.

“*Libera nos, Domine . . .*”

Mme Donadieu had been asked if she wished the rite of kissing the Pax and an offertory included in the service. She couldn't decide at first.

“Is it done, usually?”

“Six times out of ten.”

And the mourners walked in single file to the altar-steps, kissed the tablet, then dropped their alms in the plate held by an acolyte.

“*Pater noster . . .*”

Twice the priest walked slowly round the catafalque on which Martine and Philippe lay in their coffins. The first time he censed it; on the second round he sprinkled holy water.

“*Et ne nos inducas in temptationem . . .*”

Deep voices, sustained by organ-notes, sounded from the rood-loft.

“*Sed libera nos a malo.*”

“*A porta inferni . . .*”

“*Erue, Domine, animas eorum . . .*”

“*Amen.*”

There came a sudden hush—even the organ was silent—while, bearing a cross, an acolyte stepped quickly forward and took his stand before the catafalque. Carefully the undertaker's men extracted the two coffins, which looked unexpectedly narrow, from the black-and-silver pyramid.

From the organ-loft three soft notes sounded, giving the pitch to the priest. He began intoning again, this time in the minor, while the congregation shuffled out, their shoes rasping the dusty

flags. A master of ceremonies in a cocked hat mustered them as they came out, and a long file of cars formed up beside the precinct.

“*Erue me . . .*”

The priest went on intoning in the front car, seated between two boys in surplices. In the second car were Mme Donadieu, Olsen, Marthe, and Michel. Kiki was in the third, with his uncle and the lawyer, and two other men, strangers to him.

People stopped to gaze at the long, black procession as it crawled through the streets, then along the harbour-front, passing the Donadieu offices on the Quai Vallin, which were closed for the day. Quite a thousand persons on foot, including the delegates with banners, followed the ten cars heading the cortège.

“Do you intend to go back to America, Monsieur Oscar?” asked the lawyer.

Kiki hesitated before replying; he was so used to being called “Donad” that it flustered him to be addressed as “Monsieur Oscar.” Also, all this pomp accompanying a burial, once so familiar, now struck him as completely futile, indeed unseemly. “Yes,” he said, “I’m leaving by the *Ile de France*, the day after tomorrow.”

“Still, you’re quite fit and strong now . . .” the lawyer pointed out.

He was like the others, none of whom understood that this was precisely why he must be gone. This hard-won strength of his had no scope here.

At the end of the Quai Vallin there was the Canal to cross, and they passed the exact spot where one night, years ago, ten yards from the lift-bridge, old Oscar Donadieu had met his end.

Some of those present commented on this, but the family kept off the subject. Olsen was saying :

“If the rest of you had taken my advice . . .”

Mme Brun had managed to squeeze into a four-wheeler, but Charlotte went on foot, in spite of her incurable disease, referring to which she had said to her employer the previous evening :

“I’m sure it’s his fault. He was so rough!”

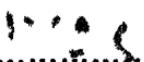
But one felt she had a morbid satisfaction in her “growth,” bearing it with the same stoical complacence as that of the small

acolyte bearing aloft the big, top-heavy cross at the head of the procession.

Meanwhile the two coffins, so similar that the undertaker's men failed to distinguish one from the other, were entering the cemetery, where a double grave awaited them—for Michel had firmly refused them access to the Donadieu family vault.

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